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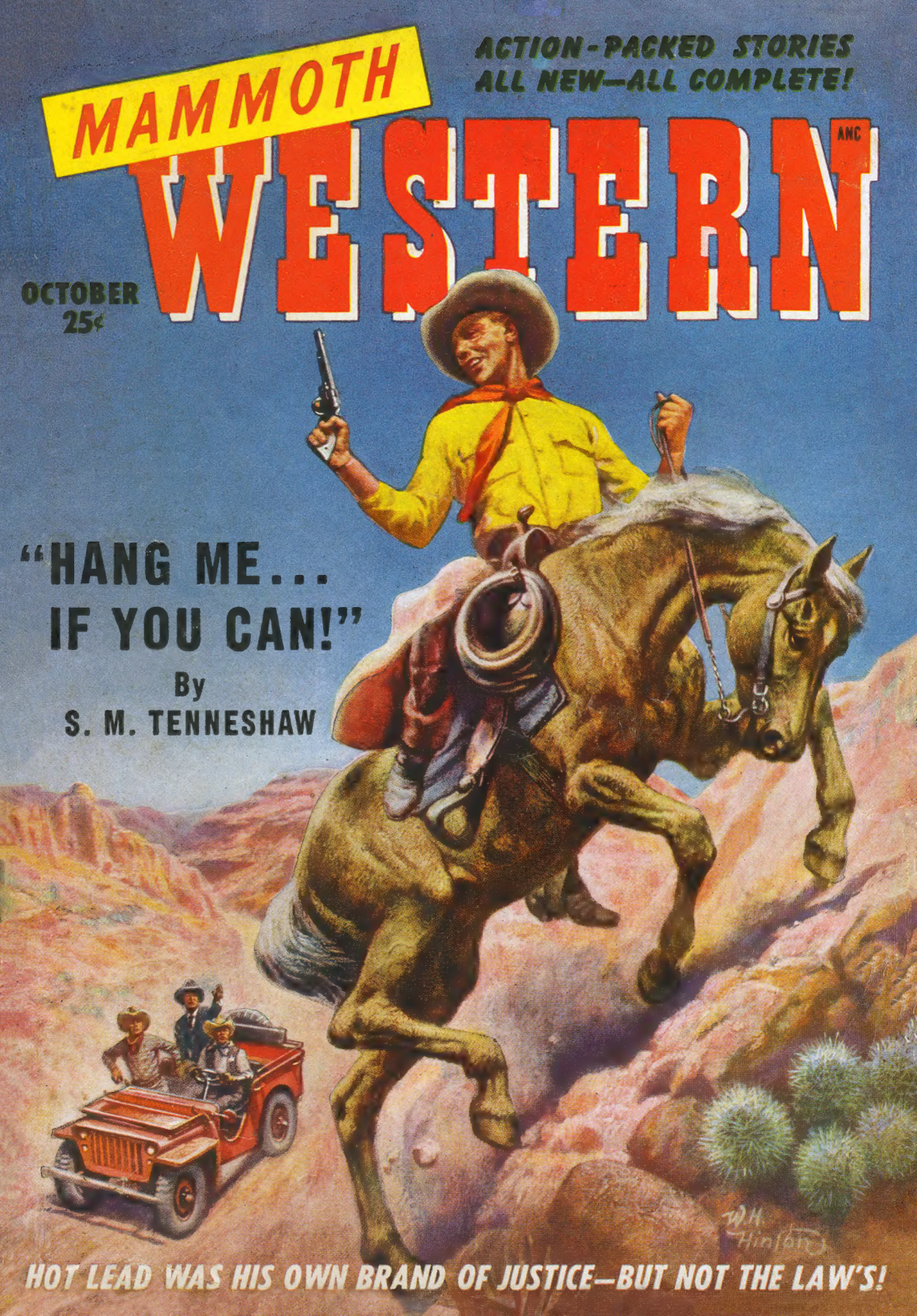

"HANG ME... IF YOU CAN!"

By
S. M. TENNESHAW

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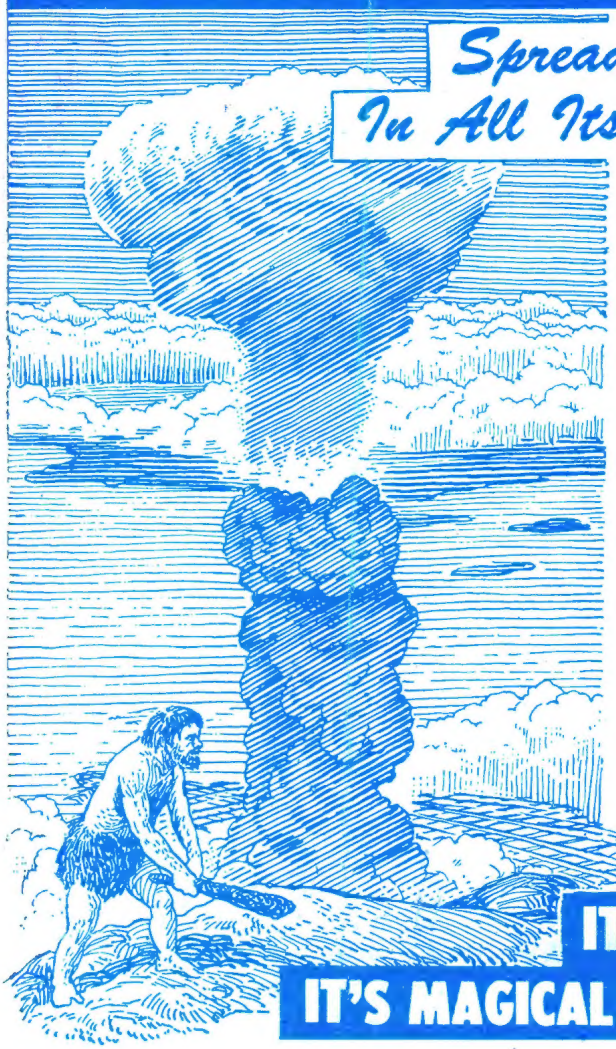

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All Stories Complete

"HANG ME . . . IF YOU CAN!" (Novelette—18,000) ..... by S. M. Tenneshaw 8

Illustrated by Bill Terry

Van Corbett was used to running things, but he reckoned without Jack Masters this time . . .

THE MEMOIRS OF JOHN SHEVLIN—THE WEST'S GREATEST DETECTIVE:
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Those Allison twins were sure confusing. How could you tell the difference?

Front cover painting by Walter H. Hinton, illustrating
a scene from "Hang Me . . . If You Can!"

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WHEN WE increased the number of our pages to the point where we could add a full-length novel to our contents, we got in touch with one of your favorite authors—Bill Hopson—and ordered a real western thriller from him.

BILL IS one of our most colorful, as well as popular, writers. He lives in a tiny town in Arizona, whose temperature in the shade on an average day is about 115. Hot? "Shucks, no," says Bill. "Just comfortable." He wears a ten-gallon hat, and jingling spurs, and his life is every bit as exciting as that of any of his western heroes. He's quite a pilot, too, and when he's not concentrating on a new plot, he's usually flying about the countryside in his neat little Piper Cub.

WHEN THE writing bug hits him, he retreats to the mountains. There he stays in solitude, in a cozy little cabin with his typewriter going full speed, until he has a completed manuscript to show for his labors.

YOU'LL AGREE, when you finish HORSE-THIEF MASQUERADE, that friend Bill can really handle story situations. And we believe that this humdinger will help a lot to make up for his fairly long absence from our scene.

YOUR EDITOR feels particularly sympathetic to this story, because she had twin cousins who were alike as the Allison twins. And if you don't think that could make for a confusing time—guess again.

H.B. HICKEY offers a most interesting story this month; different from anything we've had in a long time. The potlatches of the Kwakiutl tribes have always been a source of fascination to us. And when woven into a fictional plot where the United States government is vying with the British in settling the Kwakiutl country and in winning the favors of Roaring Water, Indian chief, this makes super exciting reading material.

MR. HICKEY has moved his family to sunny California, where he is lazily lolling in the proverbial California sunshine. We haven't been receiving too much from him since he's been out there, but whatever we've gotten, has been tops, as you're all agreed. So keep them coming, H.B.

S.M. TENNESHAW leads our table of contents this month with the cover story, "HANG ME...IF YOU CAN!" This is a modern tale of life in the west in 1949. It deals with the same people, and the same conditions that motivate them, that you and I come across daily. You should all like this one.

OUR COVER story next month is a gripping tale of violence and terror Don't miss "FOLLOW ME TO HELL!" by the ever-popular Alexander Blade.

BEFORE we close this editorial, we're going to add a few words about your favorite western illustrator, Bill Terry. Gosh, how that boy brings in the fan mail! Keep 'em coming, fans. Our Bill's a mighty fine young man—a terrific artist, and every bit as handsome and brave as your favorite western hero. We're awfully proud of him. We're planning a little surprise for Bill, in a future issue. But we can't tell you about it yet; we wouldn't want to spoil a good joke. And why not let him worry about it until it happens?.....L.S.

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"HANG ME... IF YOU

CAN!"

By
S. M. Jenneshaw

Jack Masters was sure that Van Corbett was the man behind the rustling. But to prove it was another matter. Van was one slick hombre . . .

WALT BRADLEY stood off to one side of the dance floor and watched the couples slowly drift by to the soft strains of a waltz. His eyes took in the big barn-like room, the high raftered ceiling, and the soft, gaily colored lights that filled the ballroom with a warm glow.

He felt a momentary pang sweep through him as he watched the dancers. For the scene brought back to him memories of his own youth, of nights when he had danced in this very ballroom. It hadn't changed much. There were electric lights now, of course, instead of the oil lamps he had known. But outside of that, it was much the same. Even the town hadn't changed much. Brentwood, Montana would never really change. Only the people would.

Yes, that was the only difference, he knew. He looked at the young faces that flitted by him, and he hefted his big frame in a deep sigh. His eyes fell on a brightly smiling face that swept past.

"Don't look so lonely, dad. Have fun!"

He smiled at his daughter and nodded to her. Helen was the same picture of blonde beauty that her mother had been, he thought wistfully, and wished that Janice had lived to see her daughter as she was now. He

often thought of Janice when he looked at Helen. It was almost as if she were still alive...

His eyes followed Helen and the man she was dancing with. He could see Van Corbett's broad back as the couple moved away from him, and for a moment a frown crossed his face. He didn't approve of Corbett, and he would have liked to see Helen dancing with someone else. But he had always vowed he wouldn't step in and tell the girl how to run her life.

For a fleeting instant, he saw Corbett's face, and then the couple swung away from his sight. There was no denying the cold handsomeness of the man. Corbett had a suave manner about him that could easily turn a girl's heart. But Bradley knew that was as far as it ever went with Corbett. He would use a woman just as he used men. To suit his own purpose.

And Corbett ran his ranch in the same manner. The Arrow spread had grown in size since Corbett returned from the Army. And there were many people who said that Corbett made his money from stolen cattle. Talk, of course. And yet, Bradley, like some of the other ranchers in the valley, had lost some of his stock during the past year. But, strangely, Corbett never complained that any of his cattle had been stolen.

Bradley's gaze moved over to the side of the ballroom and the long bar lined with laughing men. Off to one end of the bar, Jack Masters was staring into an empty whisky glass, his back to the dancers, oblivious of what was going on around him.

Bradley looked at the tall, straight figure of his foreman with an expression of concern. He would much rather have seen Helen dancing with Masters. He even felt that the girl would rather be with Masters. Why, then, was Jack standing at the bar alone? Did he expect the girl to come to him? Did he think that Corbett would ask him to cut in?

"Evenin', Walt," Sheriff Tod Oakes' gruff voice startled Bradley.

"Evening, Tod."

"Nice dance," Oakes remarked with a grin.

"For the young folks, yes. But it kind of shows that we're growing old, Tod."

The sheriff snorted. "Old? Why, we could both show these youngsters out there a thing or two! Besides, since when is a man crowdin' fifty, old?"

"I see that Helen is out there dancing with Van Corbett," Oakes observed. "And Masters seems set on getting himself drunk at the bar."

Bradley's lips moved in a smile—a tight, slow smile. "Then you didn't just stop to pass an idle minute with me, Tod?"

Oakes shrugged his broad shoulders. "It really ain't any of my affair, except that I'm the kind of man who don't like to see my friends getting in trouble. I kind of got a hunch that Masters is getting himself primed for mischief. You think I'm wrong?"

Bradley remained silent for a moment. His eyes switched back to the figure of Jack Masters standing at the bar. He saw his foreman downing another shot. When Bradley looked back at the sheriff, there was a worried frown on his face.

"If you were anybody else, Tod, I'd say you were crazy. I might even tell you to mind your own business. But I won't..."

Oakes nodded silently. Something of sympathy crossed his rugged features. "I can imagine how you feel, Walt. Course, maybe I'm wrong. But the way Masters has been acting since he got back from the Army, well..."

Bradley's silence was agreement. He was thinking that the sheriff was right. Jack Masters hadn't been the same since he returned from the Service. Something had changed him in the Army. He was now a man with a chip on his shoulder. A chip that had a name on it.

And the name was Van Corbett, Bradley knew. The sheriff knew it. In fact, everyone in Brentwood knew it. Everyone, that is, but Masters himself.

Bradley's thoughts were dark. It wasn't right that a man should change like that. Even if he were right in feeling the way he did. He understood how Masters felt. How he hated Van Corbett, who had been an officer in Masters' outfit. Corbett had ridden Masters, made life unbearable for him.

It wasn't a new story. Many men had gone through the same thing. Many men had hated the officers over them. Many men had had good reason for it. But in Masters' case, there was even more than a professional reason. It went much deeper. For Corbett and Masters were from the same town. And, Bradley knew, both were interested in the same girl. That had made the difference. And then, something must have happened in the Army between them that Masters would never forget.

Something that he never spoke about. That he might never reveal. Bradley felt that instinctively. He had seen it in Masters' eyes many times during the past few months. And the few times that he had tried to talk to him about it, Masters had always clammed up.

And now, when Jack Masters should have been dancing with Helen, he was standing at the bar instead. And Bradley knew that Tod Oakes might be right. For the way Masters was drinking, it could mean only one thing. A man drank to drown out some inner trouble. But drinking was never the cure. It only made matters worse.

"I don't like to see Masters like this, Walt," Bradley heard Oakes talking beside him. "You got to do something about that young man. He and Van Corbett are going to tangle one of these days..."

At the mention of Van Corbett's name, Walt Bradley's face hardened. He looked into the sheriff's gray eyes. "Maybe he won't be the only one to tangle with Corbett, Tod."

Oakes' eyebrows raised a trifle. "I don't like the tone of that, Walt. I know what you're thinking, but you better get proof about him stealing your cattle. When you get it, come to me."

Bradley looked away to keep Oakes from seeing the anger in his eyes. He knew that the sheriff was right. He sighed. "You're right, Tod. I'll remember that. And when the time comes..." His voice trailed off, and his eyes swung back to watch the dancers come to a halt as the music ended.

JACK MASTERS stared moodily into the empty whiskey glass. He was aware that the music had stopped behind him. And he was also keenly aware that out on the dance floor, Helen Bradley and Van Corbett had been dancing that waltz together. It did something inside him. For the thought of Van Corbett holding Helen's body in his arms was just more than he could stand.

But whisky didn't help him. It only made his emotions sharper, made the ache inside him swell to greater proportions. And as he squeezed the glass in his fingers, he knew suddenly that he had to get out of there. He had to get away from the place where Van Corbett was.

He started to walk away from the bar.

A soft hand touched his arm lightly. "Jack...I've been wondering what you were doing. Have you forgotten about me?"

He stared into Helen Bradley's smiling eyes. They were warm and tender, those eyes. As soft as the desert sunset. And every time he looked into them, he felt a yearning build up in his throat. Like now.

"I've been here, Helen. Or maybe you didn't notice. You seemed to be pretty well satisfied with Van Corbett out there."

The girl laughed lightly. "I won't say I'm not flattered by your jealousy, Jack. But really, I do have to be polite..."

"Well, I don't have to be. I don't like Corbett. And seeing him dance with you is something I like even less."

The laughter faded from the girl's lips. She studied Masters' lean, handsome face for a long moment. She saw the tension there. The same tension that always existed when Van Corbet's name was mentioned.

Behind them, the orchestra started up a slow fox trot. Helen smiled up at Masters. "Isn't this our dance, Jack?"

Masters had meant to leave. Even as the music started, he had made up his mind to walk out of the dance hall and into the cool night. But then, suddenly, the girl was in his arms and was guiding him lightly out onto the floor.

She was looking straight into his eyes, her arms cool and soft against him. And suddenly the fire died in his breast, and the tension left his face. He folded her close against him and danced. The rest of the room seemed to have vanished from him. There was only himself and Helen. Just Helen in his arms. Nothing else seemed to matter.

"You were going to leave, weren't you, Jack?" Her voice came softly in his ear. "I'm glad you didn't leave, Jack...I'm glad."

The words soothed him, took away the gnawing doubt that had gathered inside him, that had been building up like a raging storm. He realized suddenly that he had been acting like a fool. That he had nearly made a fool of himself in her eyes. But he couldn't help it. It was something he couldn't fight. And, in a way, she seemed to understand. She had known that he was going to leave. But now he would stay. He would dance the rest of the night. He would hold Helen in his arms and know that she wanted to be there.

He swung her to the sweet strains of the music and saw only her face smiling into his. Then, suddenly, he felt a hand touch his shoulder from behind.

He stiffened.

Even before he heard the words that followed, he knew the owner of that hand. It could only be one man. He had felt that hand before.

"May I cut in?"

He stopped dancing and his eyes turned to look into the mocking face of Van Corbett. He felt the girl grow tense in his arms.

"This isn't an open dance, Corbett." Masters forced himself to remain calm. He turned away then and started to swing Helen back into the crowd.

But, once again, Corbett's hand touched his shoulder. Harder, this time. "Cutting in is any man's privilege. I don't think you've got any ties with Miss Bradley. Correct me if I'm wrong."

Masters' hands dropped away from the girl. And as he turned to face Corbett, he heard her speak softly

and urgently. "It's all right, Jack. Don't make a scene."

If she had said anything else, it might not have mattered. But she had said it was all right. It was all right for Corbett to steal the dance he had wanted for himself. And he saw the mockery deepen in Corbett's face as the other returned his gaze.

The tension surged back into Masters' features. All of the pentup emotion that he had tried to hide, that he had tried to run away from by leaving. It was there again. And now it was magnified by the taunting mockery in Corbett's eyes.

Masters' hand moved.

Corbett saw it coming a fraction of a second too late. Instinctively, he tried to dodge, to twist his body to one side. But he was too late.

Masters' fist smashed into his mouth, slamming his head back, sending him crashing into the dancers behind him.

And Masters followed up. His fist smashed out again before Corbett had a chance to recover from the first blow. The second punch caught Corbett on the chin, and his knees sagged beneath him.

Then Masters was standing over Corbett, his breath raw and hot in his throat.

The music had stopped. And there were loud exclamations around him. But Masters wasn't aware of them. He was only aware that Corbett was down on the floor, struggling to get to his feet. And he was going to knock the man down again.

Strong arms grabbed Masters from behind and pulled him away from Corbett. Dimly, he heard Walt Bradley's booming voice: "Stop it, Jack! Have you lost your mind?"

He tried to pull away from the big rancher, but Bradley's arms tightened around him. And Corbett was on his feet then, and moving toward Masters, a trickle of blood on his lips, his eyes thin and angry.

"You'll wish you'd never done that, Masters! By God, you'll wish you'd never done that!"

And Corbett started to lash out with his fists.

But another figure stepped in between the two men.

"That'll be enough fighting," Tod Oakes said sharply. And there was a gun in his hand that stopped Corbett in his tracks.

"Maybe you didn't see who was doing the fighting, sheriff," Corbett said angrily. "I don't take that from any man! Get the hell out of my way!"

"I said there'd be no more fighting here," the sheriff returned evenly, and his gun came up in his hand. Then he stepped away and faced the two men. "I don't know what this is all about, Masters, but what Corbett says is right. You did start it. I could run you in for this."

Masters pulled himself away from Bradley and stared tensely at Oakes. "Go ahead, run me in. Use the big star on your chest. Corbett's got the law on his side, as usual."

Oakes' face showed puzzled anger. "I said I could run you in, Masters. And maybe I will, if you don't act sensible. As for the star on my chest and the law—yes, it's on the side of any man who respects it. And that's just your trouble, Masters. You don't seem to have any respect anymore. I don't know what's bothering you, but I will tell you one thing. You're riding for a fall one of these days. Ever since you've been home you've carried a chip around with you, just looking for trouble. If you keep on looking, you're sure as hell going to find it."

Masters smiled thinly. "Maybe you ought to look for trouble a little more, instead of ignoring it, sheriff. Maybe then there wouldn't be cow thieves running around loose, disguised as men who respect the law you talk about so much."

Van Corbett swore. "You're too damned loose with your tongue, Masters. Or maybe Walt Bradley likes his foremen like that!"

The big rancher stepped beside Masters, and his mouth was set grimly. "I'll apologize for Masters, sheriff. He's my foreman, and I'll take full responsibility. I'll see that he keeps out of trouble. I'm sorry that this has happened."

Oakes' lips pursed together for a moment, and he studied Masters' face. Then, slowly, he shrugged and glanced at Bradley. "If that's the way you want it, Walt. But I'd suggest you get him out of here right away."

Bradley nodded and gripped Masters' arm. He turned him away from Corbett, and then Masters saw the girl standing to one side of the group, her face pale, her eyes shocked.

He heard Bradley speak to the girl. "You'd better come on home, too, Helen. It's late anyway."

And then Bradley was leading him through the crowd and away from the dance floor.

He heard the sheriff calling out: "All right, folks, let's get on with the dance."

And the music started up again.

Then the cool night air caressed his face.

He followed Bradley in silence to the rancher's automobile. He got in beside him in the front seat, and sat down, still silent.

After a moment, the girl moved up beside the car and got in the back seat. He could hear her breath close to his ear as she got in. But she didn't say anything.

The silence in the car was like a whip against him. And as it lashed out at him, he knew he would rather have had them both tell him to his face what they were thinking.

Bradley started the motor and shot the car into the night and out along the road away from town. Masters felt the silence grow around him.

He sat staring through the windshield, feeling sick and torn inside.

MASTERS hadn't seen Helen Bradley for almost a week. He hadn't seen very much of anybody, for that matter.

He was glad to be off in the hills by himself.

He sat easily in his saddle and looked out across the valley at the emerald sunset. He could see the long, rolling acres of the Bar 4 spread out below him, and the thousands of head of cattle lazily munching at the range grass. It was a pleasant sight to him, and it made him feel free inside.

Neither Bradley nor the girl had

said anything to him about the fight at the dance. In a way, he was glad that they hadn't. But at the same time, he knew that their feelings were being deliberately held back. He knew what they both thought. That he had deliberately started the fight with Corbett. That it was just one more indication of his belligerence. That the chip on his shoulder was getting bigger every day.

He had told Bradley that he wanted to make a check on the range. It was getting close to roundup time, anyway. And the strays would have to be brought back to the main herd.

Bradley had not argued with him. Masters smiled thinly to himself as he remembered how the big rancher had nodded and said it was a good idea. It would give Masters time to cool off. Bradley hadn't said that, but it had been in the big man's eyes.

Now he looked out over the valley, his eyes taking in the huge shimmering expanse of verdant green. Off to the right, the valley came together in a narrow, bottleneck pass. That was the only direct opening into the valley, protecting it in a natural formation of jagged rock.

Off to the left, there was another pass, but that pass led straight through to the main part of the ranch.

Masters looked at it and felt a wistfulness steal through him. Helen was back at the ranch. So near, and yet so very far. There was a gap between them, he realized, a gap that might never be closed. He knew that he couldn't expect the girl to close it. It was up to him.

He sighed and turned his horse away from the lip of the hill. Already, the fast-fading twilight was stealing into the deeper shadows of night. It was time he was getting back to the ranch shack in the hills behind him. The shack that had been his home for almost a week now.

He moved his horse along the trail down the hill and up the side of the next rise. Tall sycamore and pine closed around him, and the evening breeze whispered through the trees.

Up ahead, he saw the cabin.

And something else.

There was a horse standing in front of the open door.

Instinctively, Masters' hand went to the gun at his side. His eyes squinted through the deep twilight as he sought to make out who it was at the cabin.

And then he saw Helen Bradley come out of the open door of the shack to watch him ride up.

He looked at her with surprise as he dismounted. "Is there anything wrong at the ranch, Helen?"

Her eyes dropped almost shyly for a moment. Then she shook her head. "No, Jack, everything's all right. I... I just rode out to see how you were getting along."

He studied her for a moment, his mind trying to force back the gladness that rose inside him. "Well, everything's all right at my end, Helen. Did Walt send you out here?"

She shook her head again. "No," she said, and the word left her lips almost sharply. Then she looked up at him with a troubled frown. "I had to talk to you, Jack. I just couldn't let things go on the way they were."

Some of the gladness went out of him. He sighed. "I see...Well, what is it? The fight I had with Corbett?"

"It isn't only that, Jack. It's... well, it's hard to put into words. But you've changed since you've been home. You...you're not the same person I used to know. Something's made you bitter. It's almost like Tod Oakes said the other night. You seem to have lost respect for people."

He laughed harshly. "Respect? For what people? Van Corbett? I'm sorry,

Helen, but that's a personal matter that nobody can settle but me. I know that Corbett is a big rancher now. And he seems to get everything he wants—one way or another. Maybe other people can respect him, but I can't. I didn't know you felt that way about him."

The girl moved closer to him and touched his arm. "Don't you see, Jack? That's just it. You make up fantastic things in your mind—things that aren't there. Like Corbett dancing with me. You made it a personal issue between him and you. And there wasn't any reason for it. Jack, this is a big world—big enough for everybody to live in and get along in peace. Why can't things be the same ...the way they used to be? We could be so happy..."

He moved slowly away from her. He didn't miss the pleading note in her voice. The appeal to him to confide in her. The hope that he would want to confide in her.

And he did want to. He wanted to more than anything in the world. He knew that she was the only woman in his life that would ever mean anything. And she was asking him to let her help him before it was too late.

But he had to refuse her. He couldn't tell her what was in his mind. The thing that had been haunting him. The thing that had put a chip on his shoulder, that made him hate Van Corbett and everything he stood for. He wanted to tell her—but he couldn't.

"I'm sorry, Helen, but the world isn't big enough for me and Van Corbett. You're right when you say I make a personal issue out of it with him. It is personal. And it's got to stay that way."

Her lips trembled slightly as she looked at him in the gathering dusk. Then, slowly, she looked away into the deep shadows that were thickening around them and the cabin.

Masters cleared his throat gruffly. "It's getting late, Helen, and you'd better be getting back to the ranch. I'll ride with you to the pass."

She didn't say anything. And he knew why. There wasn't anything more to say. He had closed the door on her. He had told her that his problems couldn't be hers, too. And he knew now that the gap between them had grown still further. It might never close now.

He mounted his own horse and waited as she climbed into her saddle. Then he followed her as she rode away from the cabin and along the trail through the trees.

They rode in silence. And once again he felt it lash out at him. Just as he had felt it the other night in the car, when they rode back to the ranch. Only this time he knew that it was a silence that hurt her more than it did him.

They reached the top of the hill that overlooked the valley stretching into the west. Now the shimmering haze of twilight was deep, and the milling cattle below them were only faint smudges of moving shadow patterns.

He pulled his horse to a halt and the girl reined in beside him. His eyes took in the trail that wound down to his left, toward the pass that led to the ranch off in the distance. Helen would be going down that trail in a few minutes. He would watch her go.

"Jack!"

He heard her exclaim softly beside him. He turned and looked at her. She was staring off to the right, and pointing down into the valley toward the bottleneck pass. He followed her gaze.

"What is it, Helen?"

"I don't know, I thought I saw something..."

He squinted his eyes and peered into the dark shadows. He could see only the moving mass of the cows close to the pass. And then, as the thought crossed his mind, he frowned. That was strange. The cattle shouldn't have been that close to the pass, and yet, there must have been over a hundred in the herd grouped close to it now. And then he saw something else.

A faint glint in the fading light. A number of streaking shapes moving around the edge of the cattle.

"What is it, Jack? Do you see something?"

The girl's voice was puzzled. And for a moment, the frown stayed on his own face. But then, suddenly, he knew.

Those shapes moving the cattle toward the pass were—riders!

He turned swiftly to the girl. "I've been waiting for something like this to happen! Those are riders down there. And they're moving some of our cattle toward the pass!"

He saw the astonishment on the girl's face, and then a look of anger. "It must be the same ones who have been rustling stock for the past few months! Jack, what can we do? We can't get back to the ranch in time. . ."

He spoke crisply, his hand closing over the butt of his gun. "You ride back to the ranch. Tell your father to get the men together and come back here. I'll see if I can hold them off until then."

"But you wouldn't stand a chance, Jack!" Helen protested, fear showing in her eyes as she looked at him. "There's no use in taking a risk like that! Come back—"

"I'm going down there. I've been waiting a long time for this. If I back down, I might not get another chance. Somebody's going to pay for this rustling. And it's got to be now."

He didn't wait for her to protest further. He turned his horse and rode off to the right, down the trail toward the floor of the valley far below him.

HE COULD hear the muffled shouts of the rustlers as he came close to the milling herd. His first guess had been correct, he saw. There must be at least a hundred head in the group that was moving through the pass.

He reined in his horse sharply and stood in the shadows, tense and watchful. His hand held his gun now, and the feel of it was good. And as he waited, he knew what he wanted to hear; what he wanted to see: One of the riders, one of the ghostly phantoms that was hurrying the cattle through the pass.

And then he saw two of them. They were nearly a hundred yards ahead of him, moving in the growing darkness, and they stopped their horses to watch the progress of the raid.

He heard a voice call out, "Hurry it up! We haven't got all night!"

He had heard that voice before. He knew it. And then, as the man repeated the command, he was sure.

It was Sam Polk, foreman of Corbett's Arrow spread!

Masters' hand tightened on his gun and he started to move his horse forward. Then he heard the second man call out sharply, "Get the rest of them through! You're wasting time!"

And at the words, a chill of anger swept through Masters. For that voice could belong only to one man—Van Corbett!

Masters had meant to be cautious. He had planned on moving up slowly and catching them by surprise. But that was before he had heard Corbett's voice. Before the anger rose in him like a wave of fury.

He wanted only one thing now. To

get Corbett. He had caught him in the act. It couldn't be talked away now. There was only one thing to do —and a gun would do it.

He sent his horse leaping forward, and his gun raised in his hand.

The distance closed between him and the two men. His eyes were fastened on them in flaming rage. And his finger was tight on the trigger of his weapon.

He heard a shout from his left. "Look out! There's someone coming behind you!"

And as the warning split the night air, he saw Corbett and Sam Polk turn startled faces toward him.

Masters' gun exploded just as the two men wheeled their horses to the right.

The warning saved Corbett. And Masters swung his gun to aim at the man once more.

But another gun exploded in the night to his left.

He saw the flash of light from the weapon and knew that it was from the man who had shouted.

He felt a thump of sound beneath him as the bullet hit his horse.

Then he heard Corbett shouting wildly, "Let's get out of here! There may be others with him!"

And then Masters' horse collapsed.

He felt the animal falling beneath him and tried to tense himself for the earth-jarring crash.

But he was too late.

The horse hit the dirt in a skidding tumble, and he felt himself shoot over the animal's head. Dimly, he saw the ground rushing up to meet him, and his head seemed to explode as it hit.

He heard the riders moving away in the darkness as the last of the herd shot through the pass.

And blackness closed over him in a wave.

"JACK! JACK! Answer me!"

The words seemed to come from far away, through a heavy fog.

Gradually, Masters opened his eyes. He lay on the ground, and his head was a roaring buzz. For a moment, he didn't know where he was. But then, slowly, full consciousness returned to him.

Helen Bradley was kneeling on the ground beside him, holding his head in her arms, her voice calling tremulously to him: "Jack! Please answer me!"

He struggled painfully to a sitting position on the ground. He rubbed his head for a moment, and then looked at the girl. He saw relief flood her features as he moved.

"I...I thought they shot you."

Masters rose slowly to his feet, looking around him. His eyes fastened grimly on the dead body of his horse a few feet away. And then he saw his gun lying on the ground nearby. He walked over and picked it up. He held it in his hand and looked into the darkness toward the pass.

There was only silence there. Silence that meant Corbett and Polk and the rest of the Arrow riders had made good their escape. And taken over a hundred head of Bar 4 stock with them.

He turned angrily to the girl. "I told you to ride back to the ranch for help! It's too late now!"

The girl touched him lightly with her hand. "I couldn't go. I...I was afraid you might get hurt."

The anger drained from him then, and suddenly she was in his arms, sobbing quietly against his breast.

He held her there for a long moment, his mind a conflicting whirlpool of emotions. He knew what he should be doing right now. He should be on a horse and going after Corbett.

He should be taking his gun and trying to find the man. And end it once and for all.

But, somehow, he didn't want to do that now. For the gap between Helen and himself was suddenly gone. She was in his arms, sobbing in gladness that he was alive. He had lost a battle and gained something more important. He knew that.

But as he stood, staring over the girl's head into the darkness, he knew also that the battle wasn't lost. He didn't have to go after Corbett now. Corbett had made a play and lost. He had been caught red-handed. And he would pay. Bradley and the rest of the Bar 4 men would be riding down on Corbett in a few hours. There would be a showdown.

He held the girl close against him until she quieted. Then he gently released her.

She looked up at him, and he could see a wan smile on her face in the dim light.

"They didn't get me, Helen. Only my horse. But they'll wish they had gotten me before the night is over."

The smile faded from her face and a serious look took its place. "You saw them, Jack? You know who it was?"

He heard the tense note in her voice and nodded. "Yes, I know who it was—Van Corbett and his hands, one of them Sam Polk. I would have gotten both of them, but one of their men shot my horse from under me."

He heard the girl gasp. "Corbett! Then it was him—"

He laughed harshly. "Yes. I've known it all along. But everybody thought it was just my own personal grudge against him. But this time he won't get away with it."

The girl stared off toward the pass and then back at him. "We've got to tell dad..."

Masters nodded and moved to her horse. "And this time there's going to be more than talk. Corbett's going to get action!"

He mounted Helen Bradley's horse and helped her up on the saddle behind him. Then he turned the horse and headed across the floor of the valley, toward the west.

There was a grim purpose in him as he rode.

"YOU SAY you saw Van Corbett and Sam Polk?"

Walt Bradley's big face was wreathed in anger. He walked up and down across the living room rug in the Bar 4 ranch house, his features dark.

Masters stood quietly watching him, while Helen Bradley sat on the edge of a divan, her face tense.

"I saw them both. I heard them both shouting to their men. And just when I shot at them, one of their riders saw me. If my horse hadn't been killed, I might have gotten them both."

"I can't believe it!" Bradley ground out. "Corbett doesn't have to stoop to rustling. His ranch is big enough for two men—certainly for one!"

Masters laughed. "For a man like Corbett, nothing is too big, or too dirty. I told Helen to ride back here for you and the men. If she had, we'd have them all by now. As it is, they've made a clean getaway. But we know the truth—so what are we waiting for?"

There was a sharp, questioning note in Masters' voice as he looked at the big rancher. And Bradley stopped his pacing to look at Masters.

"You're saying that we should ride out after them?"

Masters nodded. "What else? They've left their calling card. It's up to us to return their visit. And

the sooner the better. By now they'll be back at their ranch celebrating the way things turned out. We can help them celebrate with a dose of hot lead."

The anger subsided from Walt Bradley's face then, and in its place a thoughtful frown appeared. "That would have been the way to do things thirty or forty years ago. But this is 1949. We can't take the law into our own hands."

Masters stared at him. "Right now, we are the law. Corbett and his men have shown a disregard for it. We have every right to make them pay."

"You're right and wrong, Jack," Bradley insisted. "We don't represent the law, but we do have a right to make them pay. And they will pay—in due course."

Masters hooked his thumbs over his gunbelt and stared at Brandley. "I don't follow you. What do you mean, in due course?"

Bradley sighed. "I mean simply that what you saw tonight will be reported to the sheriff. It will be up to him to take action against Corbett. We'll see that he does. But we can't take the responsibility on our own shoulders. You should have learned that in the Army."

As the words left Bradley's lips, he saw that he had made a mistake. For Masters' face clouded at mention of the Army, and there was a hard glint in his eyes. "I learned a few things in the Army, all right—and one of them was to shoot an enemy on sight. Corbett is an enemy, and as far as I'm concerned, a bullet is the only thing he'll understand."

Helen Bradley spoke up suddenly, her voice holding an appeal in it. "Dad's right, Jack; I should have seen it before. We've got to let the law take care of Corbett. Don't you understand? You can't decide what the law should do all by yourself!"

"Helen is right," Bradley argued. "This isn't just one man against another man. It's a case of a whole group of men against society. With the evidence you can give Tod Oakes, Corbett will be through."

Masters stared from the big rancher to his daughter. And though he heard their words, he couldn't believe them. He knew that a man like Van Corbett could fix anything with a little time. And what happened tonight was no exception. By the time that Oakes got around to investigating, Corbett would have the cattle safely hidden away and neat alibis fixed up for himself and his men. Even now they would be doing that. It was probably already too late.

But as he looked back at Walt Bradley, he saw that the man had made his decision, and nothing he could say would stop him.

"Then you won't go after him?"

"I'll see the sheriff in the morning. Then we'll all go. It's the right way. And the only way."

"By morning it will be too late," Masters said flatly.

Bradley sighed. "If it will make you feel better, we can go see Oakes tonight."

Jack Masters fixed his lips in a thin smile. He nodded slowly. "That suits me. But I'll go to town alone. I'll tell Oakes what happened. And I'll bring him back here. We've got enough men to deputize a posse."

Bradley looked over to his daughter and saw her nod. He turned back to Masters. "Very well, Jack. But don't get any other ideas in your head. The cattle that were rustled belong to me. And I won't have any man getting ideas of running things himself. Do I make myself clear?"

Masters nodded. It was all too clear. The big man was telling him

to take the chip off his shoulder. It was more than just telling. Bradley was ordering him.

"You don't have to worry. I'll see Oakes."

He turned then and walked from the room, conscious of Bradley and the girl watching him as he went.

BRENTWOOD'S main street was brightly lit as Masters drove the Bar 4 station wagon slowly into town.

All the way in, he had been thinking of what he would say to Sheriff Oakes, and it had been bothering him. For he knew that the sheriff would think just as Bradley did, that Masters wanted to vent a personal quarrel more than anything else. And he knew Oakes would be right in thinking so. But if he were as much of a lawman as he claimed to be, Oakes would have to act against Corbett.

His eyes scanned the far length of the main street, looking for the sheriff's office at the opposite end. As the car moved slowly along the street, the glittering flash sign of the Crystal Bar caught his eyes.

And something else.

There was a station wagon parked in front of the Crystal Bar.

A station wagon with an arrowhead painted on the door.

Masters' eyes fastened on the car and his foot hit the brake as he pulled his own car into the curb across the street.

He sat then and continued to stare at the station wagon. It belonged to Van Corbett. And that could mean only one thing. Corbett, or some of the Arrow riders, were in town. And they would be in town for only one reason. To provide an alibi. To prove they couldn't have been riding the night range at bottleneck pass.

It was clever. Very clever. And Masters' eyes hardened as the thought drove home in his mind. Corbett was taking no chances. It had all been very carefully planned. There would be witnesses to prove that Corbett's men couldn't have been the ones who pulled the raid on the Bar 4.

He glanced away from the station wagon and up the street, toward the sheriff's office. And as he looked, he began to see that it would be useless to talk Oakes into taking action now. It was too late.

Too late for the law.

And then he thought of Van Corbett. And Corbett's mocking face rose in his mind, laughing at him, taunting him. Daring him to do something about it.

Masters' eyes switched back to the Crystal Bar then, and a grim purposefulness hardened his features. In a swift movement, he opened the door of the station wagon and got out. He slammed the door behind him and walked slowly across the street.

As he stood in front of the glazed glass doors of the tavern, he moved his right hand to the gun at his waist. The thought crossed his mind that it was illegal to wear a gun into town, and a bitter smile crossed his face. It was illegal to rustle cattle, too. He moved through the door of the tavern.

A juke box was beating out a cowboy ballad in the rear of the room, its soft rhythm blending in with the dim lights behind the long mahogany bar.

He stood inside the door and looked at the laughing group of men standing in front of the bar, glasses of beer before them.

There were five of them. All riders of the Arrow spread.

And Sam Polk, the foreman, was

in the center, his short body leaning against the bar, one foot hooked over the brass rail.

The laughter stilled as they saw him standing at the entrance. And then only the sound of music filled the room. Behind the bar, the bartender glanced casually at Masters, and Masters saw him frown as the man noticed the gun Masters wore at his hip.

The slow drawl of Sam Polk's voice broke the silence. "Well, if it ain't Masters of the Bar 4. And wearing a gun into town. Has Oakes made you a deputy?"

The others laughed at Polk's sarcasm. But their laughter faded when Masters walked toward them, his face set in a cold look.

He halted a few feet away from Polk and stared at the shorter man. "You didn't waste any time getting to town, did you, Polk?"

Polk's eyes clouded, but that was the only sign of emotion he showed. "The boys and I have been in town for some time, if it's any of your business."

"How about the rest of your men, and Corbett? I suppose they're fixing up a neat alibi, too."

"Just what the hell are you talking about?" Polk demanded.

Masters' voice was level and cold when he spoke. "Maybe I can refresh your memory a little. Say, a few hours back. When I saw you and Corbett and a group of Arrow riders raiding Bar 4 cattle at bottleneck pass."

A tense silence followed Masters' words. Then Polk laughed harshly. "You've really got a damned lot of gall, Masters. I'll try and forget what you just said. You're either drunk or crazy."

But as Polk said the words, Masters noted the faint alarm that had crept into the man's voice. He watched Polk turn all the way around from the bar and face him squarely, his hands dropping to the sides of his corduroy jacket.

"It's not going to be that easy, Polk," Masters snapped. "I was the one who surprised you and Corbett and the others. You shot my horse from under me and thought I'd been killed. That was your mistake. You should have come back and made sure. But you didn't. You were afraid I might have had others with me. You're trapped, and you know it."

Polk sneered. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about. If there was any raid on Bar 4 cattle, it's news to me. And even if there was a raid, you can't accuse me of having anything to do with it. I ain't taking that from you, Masters. Or maybe it's just your war nerves getting the best of you again."

As the words left Polk's lips, Masters felt a hot rage shoot through him. He saw the laughter bubble from the lips of the others, and it was more than he could stand. His hand moved to the gun at his hip. "I'm taking you in to see Sheriff Oakes, Polk. And we're going right now. You'll be able to do a lot of laughing from a cell."

As he spoke, his hand closed over his gun and he slowly began to draw it from its holster.

He saw a flash of anger that turned to sudden fear in Polk's eyes. The man's bluff hadn't worked the way he had hoped, and it showed in his face.

"You can go to hell!" Polk shouted at him—and his right hand swept back the jacket, revealing a gun stuck in his belt.

Polk drew in a single swift motion.

But Masters' own gun whipped into his hand in the same instant.

For a single split second, the eyes of the two men locked, and Masters knew that Polk was going to shoot.

He acted without thinking.

As Polk's gun roared with sound, Masters' own bullet was already crashing into his body.

The short man slammed back against the bar, and his gun dropped from nerveless fingers.

Then, slowly, his knees sagged beneath him, and the surprised look of pain on his face froze into a grimace of death.

Then Polk hit the floor of the tavern and lay still, a red flow welling on the floor beneath him.

There was silence in the tavern. It had all happened so fast that every man was frozen where he stood. Behind the bar, there was shocked amazement on the face of the bartender.

And then one of the other Arrow riders shouted: "He's killed Sam! You all saw it! It was murder!"

The others came to life then, and Masters saw them nod their heads in fearful assent. He looked at the bartender.

"You saw what happened. Polk drew on me."

But even as he said the words, he knew that it was useless. The bartender only stared at him in a cold glare.

He heard the sound of voices on the street outside. In a few moments, a crowd would gather at the tavern. And then the sheriff would come.

He could see Oakes even then. He knew what the lawman would say. He would agree with Corbett's men. He would call it murder, just as they had. He wouldn't say it was self-defense. He wouldn't say that Polk was a damned rustler who got only what he deserved.

He would take Masters to a cell, and Corbett would see that he paid with his life. The law would help Corbett.

Corbett! *Corbett! Corbett!*

The man's name screamed through Masters' mind, and suddenly a red haze swept through him. He wouldn't stay where they could get him like that. It would be just what Corbett wanted. With Masters out of the way, there would be no one to prove that he had rustled Bradley's stock. It was that simple.

Masters backed away from the still body in front of him His gun was trained on the rest of Corbett's men. But they were making no move. They were only staring at him. And some of the fear was gone from their faces now. He could read in their eyes what they were thinking. They were thinking that he had dug his own grave. That they would help bury him in it.

"This isn't the last you'll be seeing of me," Masters told them. "And you can tell Corbett the same thing. He may think he can take over the valley this easy, but he's going to have to settle with me first. If the law won't take care of him, I will! Tell him that!"

And then he moved through the glazed glass doors of the tavern and out to the street.

He holstered his gun and moved through the small crowd that was gathering in front of the tavern. He heard them ask what had happened, and saw them back away as they noticed his gun.

Then he was in the street and heading for the station wagon.

As he started the motor, he saw the doors of the Crystal Bar open and the Arrow spread riders come out on the street, shouting and pointing at him.

Masters fed gas to the car and swung in a sharp U turn. People got out of his way, and then he was

gunning the car out of town, fast.

He headed back the way he had come. Toward the Bar 4.

And he saw the face of Helen Bradley in his mind. And the rough features of Walt Bradley. Would they understand? Would they know that he had had to shoot Polk to save his own life? Would they remember that Polk was a rustler? Would they think of that?

He pressed hard against the accelerator of the car, and felt it leap through the night.

HE DROVE into the ranch yard and parked the car beside the corral. He had driven in quietly, watching the lights in the ranch house, waiting for the front door to open.

But apparently he hadn't been heard.

He got out of the car and walked swiftly over to the bunk house. He strode inside and saw a group of Bar 4 riders playing cards at a table at the far end of the room. They looked up as he came in.

"We heard about the raid Corbett and his men pulled, Jack," one of them said. "Is the old man going to let Corbett get away with it?"

Masters shrugged and went to his own bunk. "I don't know, boys. I don't know what Bradley is going to do."

He was tense as he spoke, conscious of their eyes on his face as he threw some of his clothes together and stuffed them into a saddle bag.

"You goin' somewhere?" one of the men called out.

Masters finished fastening the bag and turned, a tense smile on his face.

"Just a little trip. I'll be around."

He didn't wait for a reply, but strode outside to the corral.

He put the saddlebag on the ground and went into the corral. The horses snorted and milled as he approached them. He eased them with a low voice and cut a sorrel from their ranks and led it to the gate, shutting it behind him. Then he loaded the saddlebag on the rear of the horse and prepared to mount.

"Masters!"

He heard the gruff voice of Walt Bradley call sharply into the darkness. And then the big form of the rancher loomed into sight.

Masters stiffened beside his horse and watched as the other stopped a few feet away. Even before Bradley spoke, Masters knew what the big man was going to say.

"I just got a phone call from Tod Oakes." Bradley's voice was heavy and shocked. "He said that you had met some of Corbett's men in town and murdered Sam Polk. Is that true?"

Masters felt the disbelief in Bradley's voice. He shook his head. "I didn't murder Polk. He drew on me when I tried to take him over to Oakes' office. I had to shoot. He'd have killed me, and used his men as witnesses to prove it was self-defense. It didn't work out the way he had it planned."

The rancher swore in the darkness. "Good Lord, man, do you realize what you've done? I warned you about taking the law into your own hands! You wouldn't listen. Now you've killed a man!"

Masters' jaw tightened. He had been right. It was just the way he had thought it would be. Bradley thought about nothing but the law. Make things nice and legal. Let a man like Corbett get away with his crimes and laugh while the law tried futilely to stop him.

"You think I murdered Polk?" Masters asked flatly.

"I didn't say what I think!" Bradley snapped back. "I only said what I know. You shot a man. You took the law in your own hands. You disobeyed my orders, Masters. I should never have let you go to town. I should have called the sheriff and explained over the phone. I thought I'd let you have your way. I thought maybe you would learn something. But you didn't."

"And now I see you're planning to run away. Do you know what that means? You'll be a hunted man. You'll be tracked down. If your story is true, I'll be on your side, helping all I can. But I can't help you if you run away."

Bradley spoke forcefully, and Masters knew that the man was sincere. But he also knew that he couldn't play the game the way Bradley wanted him to. It would be just what Van Corbett wanted.

"Sorry, Walt," Masters said slowly. "I'd like to do it your way, but I can't. Corbett showed his hand when he rustled the stock tonight. I'm not going to stand by and let him get away with it. The fact that I killed Sam Polk isn't going to change things. Do you think Corbett will stop if I give up and stand trial? As long as I'm free, he'll have to move fast. He can't stop now. And I plan to be around when the showdown comes."

"You're crazy!" Bradley said sharply. "You don't now what you're doing. If you think anything of any of us here, you'll stop this mad business and give yourself up. How do you think Helen is taking this?"

Masters set his lips at mention of the girl's name. He said nothing, but mounted his horse.

"You can't get far, Masters! Don't you see how useless it is?"

He heard Bradley cursing in frustrated anger. But he swung his horse and set his spurs in the animal's flanks.

He heard Bradley's shouts as he rode out of the ranch yard and into the night.

THE MORNING sun was warm on his face as he moved out of the cabin and mounted his horse.

He hadn't slept.

He had sat in a chair during the remaining hours of the night and the early morning, watching the sun climb slowly up into the eastern sky.

He had had plenty of time to think.

And his thoughts had been heavy. He thought of Helen, of what she must be feeling. And of Walt Bradley. The rancher's words burned in his brain: *"You can't get far! Don't you see how useless it is?"*

Was it useless? And how far could he get? Over the state line? And then where?

Bradley had been right. At least about that. But he had been wrong, too. For Masters hadn't intended leaving. Not just yet. There was a score to be settled. He knew Van Corbett. He knew him better than any other man alive. He knew that Corbett would not stop now. Things were ripe for him. The heat of triumph was too great in the man's blood.

And there was the other side of Corbett that the people of Brentwood didn't know. The cold ruthlessness of the man. The thing that had made a hero out of Corbett in the eyes of the world. His utter disregard for life in furthering his own goal.

But Masters knew these things. And because he knew them, he was aware that Corbett would be stalking for a kill. He wanted to be the power in Brentwood. And to be that, he had to crush Bradley.

Now Masters swung into the saddle and felt the warm sunlight. But there was no warmth in his heart. Only a cold grimness. The knowledge that he had to watch Corbett. Be ready for his move.

He sent his horse down the trail through the trees and away from the cabin. He knew where he was going. And Corbett wouldn't expect him to go there. He had learned how to spy in the Army. Watching the Arrow ranch would be no problem.

And Corbett wouldn't think of his doing that. He would expect him to hide out in the hills until things cooled off.

He set spurs to his horse and rode away through the trees bordering the cabin trail.

HE REACHED the Arrow spread in less than an hour, skirting through the hills. And he grew more cautious now that he was on Corbett's property.

Ahead, over the rise of the next hill, would the the dirt road that led back to Brentwood from the ranch itself. He would cross the road and head for the ranch from the opposite side.

He moved his horse slowly over the rise, and felt the animal dig its hoofs into the steep side of the hill that led down to the road below. His attention was taken in guiding the horse, and it wasn't u n t i l he reached the bottom that he heard the car motor.

He reined in sharply, and his hand dropped to his gun.

His eyes swung up the road, and he tensed as he saw a jeep heading straight toward him.

He knew that jeep. It belonged to Sheriff Tod Oakes. It had been a war surplus purchase.

And he saw three men riding in the jeep. Oakes was driving. His deputy, Merton, sat beside him, and in the back seat was the big form of Walt Bradley.

In the same instant, Oakes saw him. The jeep came to a grinding halt not fifty feet away.

Masters' gun was in his hand and pointed at the jeep before Oakes or Merton could draw their own guns.

"Easy, sheriff! I wouldn't try anything!" Masters snapped.

"Damn it, Masters. Aren't you in enough trouble already? Put that gun away!" the sheriff called.

Bradley started to get out of the jeep.

Masters yelled sharply, "Stay where you are, Walt! It'll be safer for everybody that way."

He saw the rancher sink back against the seat, and then Bradley shouted, "Jack! Don't be a fool! Do as Tod says—give yourself up. You'll never be able to prove your innocence this way!"

Masters shook his head stubbornly. "I'm sorry, Walt. That's not the way I see it. And now that we've settled that, just what are you doing here?"

It was Oakes who answered. "Seems to me, it's you that o u g h t to be doing the explaining. You're on Van Corbett's property. You weren't planning on starting any more trouble, were you?"

"Any trouble that's been started is Corbett's doing, not mine. Or don't you believe it was him who rustled over a hundred head of our stock last night?"

"Look, Masters," Oakes argued, "I'm not saying anything one way or the other. If you had come to me with your story right away, maybe I'd have been able to do something. As it is, you've killed a man, and

that puts a different light on the matter. You can't expect your word to hold much weight when you run away like a coward!"

The words cut into Masters like a knife. Before he could answer, Walt Bradley spoke up.

Bradley's voice was earnest. "Jack, listen to me. You know I wouldn't give you anything but good advice. And I'm telling you right now that you're doing the wrong thing. You can't take the law into your own hands. That sort of thing passed out fifty years ago. You've got to let the proper people handle things now. If you don't come to your senses, it will be too late. The sheriff and I were just on our way to see Corbett. Oakes has a search warrant in his pocket to look over Corbett's stock. If you give up now, and come back to town with us, you can still give evidence against Corbett. But if you hold out, it will mean a posse..."

Bradley's voice trailed off significantly. And Masters knew what he meant. A posse with guns. And they'd shoot to kill, if need be.

"I'll take that chance," Masters said. "Hang me...if you can!"

He turned his horse and started the sorrel back up the side of the hill, the way he had come.

He watched the jeep over his shoulder, his gun held high and ready. He heard Oakes swearing angrily and Bradley calling out for him to return

Then he shouted back at them: "Don't try to follow me—and don't pull any guns! And when you see Corbett, tell him I'm still around and will be looking for him!"

Then he was over the lip of the hill, and he spurred his horse into a gallop down the opposite side. He holstered his gun and headed back through the hills.

Off in the distance, a lone rider fixed sharp eyes on Masters' lean back. Then he moved off after Masters, getting close enough to keep him in sight. But far away enough to keep from being seen himself as he hugged the blind spots in the terrain...

THE SOFT whisper of the night wind rustled through the trees outside the cabin. Masters sat in the dim light of a smoky oil lamp and stared moodily at the partly open door.

It had been a long, dragging day. A day in which he had done nothing but ride in circles through the hills, finally to return to the cabin.

He had been tempted to return to Corbett's ranch, but he knew that it would have been too risky after meeting the sheriff and Bradley. Corbett would have learned of his presence on Arrow land and would be on guard.

And he knew that time was running short for him.

He remembered what Bradley had said about a posse. And he knew that would be the next step.

And once started, there was only one possible ending.

He listened to the whisper of the wind and thought about leaving for good. He might be able to make it. A man can change his name, and in the vast stretches of the open West, it isn't so easy to be tracked down. Not like in the larger cities. It could be done...

But he rejected the idea with a sigh. It wasn't any good. It couldn't happen that way. He didn't want it to. He had to stick it out.

And then suddenly he heard another sound in the night outside. Something that was not the soft whisper of the wind.

He got to his feet and moved

swiftly to the door. His gun slid from his holster, and he stepped out of the cabin.

A pale moon spread a dim, silvery glow through the tops of the trees around the cabin. He listened tensely.

The sound grew. The sound of an approaching rider.

He moved quickly beside his own horse, tethered to a tree a short distance from the cabin. He was out of sight now from whoever was approaching, and he could ride away in a moment if necessary.

In the dim light, he saw a horse come through the lane of trees along the trail. And his breath caught sharply.

It was Helen Bradley.

The girl stopped her horse a hundred feet from the cabin, and though Masters couldn't see her features plainly, he knew that she was looking at the partly open door and the smoky light of the oil lamp that filtered through it.

Then he heard her call out: "Jack! Are you there? It's Helen!"

He moved away from his horse and stepped out into sight on the trail. He put his gun back in his holster.

"What are you doing up here, Helen? How did you know I'd be at the cabin?"

The girl moved her horse closer and dismounted. Then she was facing him and he could see her features in the moonlight. They were pale and tense, and her lips were trembling.

"I had to find you, Jack. And the only place I could think to look was here..."

He studied her closely. "Does your father know you're here?"

"No. I suppose I should have told him—but I wanted to talk to you."

He breathed easier. But at her words, he felt resentment flood him. Was Helen convinced that he was a killer?

"You're just one step ahead of a posse then," he said bitterly.

She bit her lips and moved closer to him. He could see the dampness in her eyes now, and his throat felt tight as he looked at her.

"Jack, I'm not going to say you were wrong in doing what you did. I believe you wouldn't have done it without a good reason. But running away isn't helping you—or any of us! Can't you see that? Won't you please come back?"

"I made my decision last night, Helen. What should I go back to? A trial and a conviction at the hands of Corbett's lying men? What chance would I have?"

"You'd be a l i v e." Her hand reached out and touched his. Her voice was strained in entreaty. "Just think for a moment. What plan can you have? You've got a personal grudge against Corbett. I know that, but I don't know what it is. You know he rustled some of our stock, and yet we can't prove it. Dad and the sheriff went over Corbett's place today and couldn't find a single head of Bar 4 stock. You know yourself you can't hide a hundred head of cattle. What can you possibly gain by running away? There are enough decent people around Brentwood who know you're not a killer—who will believe you if you come back now. But if you don't, they'll be sure that you are and that you're running away because you're guilty, just as Corbett claims you are. Doesn't that make sense to you?"

He looked at her silently for a moment. Then, "Maybe it does make sense, Helen. But I'm not giving Corbett the chance to put me where he wants me, and then laugh. If he

wants me, he can come and get me. I'll be waiting."

Her hand fell away from him, and he had the feeling again that a gap was opening between them.

"Is that all you can think about?" she cried. "Is there nothing in your mind but getting even with Van Corbett? Don't I mean anything to you? Anything at all?"

Her voice stopped for a few seconds, and then she continued in halting tones, "You told me a long time ago that I was the only girl for you. I believed you... And I felt the same way about you. I've tried to forgive the way you've been acting since you came home from the Army. I've tried to explain it away in my mind. But if you don't come back with me now..."

He looked at her face, tense with emotion, the appeal crying out at him in her eyes. And he couldn't speak. His throat tightened, and he remained silent.

"Then you won't do it—for me?" Her words were bitter now, reproachful. "Do you know what this means? You're refusing to let me share your troubles—to help you in every way I can. You're shutting me out of your life—and if you do, I don't want to be part of it again ...ever."

She had spoken slowly, her lips quivering. Now she lapsed into silence, and he could see her mouth close in a tightness that told him she had meant every word she said.

She stood only a few feet away from him now, but the distance between them had become an enormous gulf. Because there was only one answer he could give.

"I'm sorry, Helen. I don't want it to be this way. You don't understand, you just don't—"

But she didn't wait for him to finish. A short sob left her lips, and she turned away from him and moved swiftly to her horse.

He stood and watched her mount with agony burning inside him. And she didn't look back as she turned her horse and rode slowly away, back along the trail.

He watched her go, and for the first time his heart felt too heavy to hold inside of him. He wanted to call her back. But if he did that, he would have to tell her she was right. That his pride was not worth it. That a personal grudge was too small to carry all his life.

He watched her fade into the shadows of the trail, and then even the slow sound of her horse grew faint to his ears.

He clenched his hands as his emotions fought inside him.

Did he want it to end this way? Was it worth it? Could he lose Helen this way?

Suddenly, he knew he couldn't. He began to see things clearly for the first time. He was wrong. All wrong. He was not only ruining his own life, but Helen's as well. And it was still not too late. He could return. He could catch up with her, tell her that he had been a fool. That he would give himself up. And even if Corbett won out in the trial—even if he spent time in prison—she would still be his when he returned...

Masters moved toward the cabin and went inside. He pushed the door shut with his heel and walked swiftly to the single table in the middle of the room. He began putting his things together beside the oil lamp, and his fingers were nervous in his haste.

The sudden sound of the door opening behind him froze him where he stood. His hand went for his gun then, and he twisted around to face the door.

A smiling face greeted him.

Van Corbett stood in the doorway, a gun pointed steadily in his hand.

"I wouldn't make any fast moves, Masters," Corbett said, his voice cold and deadly despite his smile. "Were you thinking of leaving? Maybe going after Helen Bradley?"

Masters could only stare at the man in astonishment. He watched as Corbett moved into the room, and behind Corbett he could see more of his men grouped in the doorway.

Corbett moved to the opposite side of the table, and one of his men stepped around Masters and pulled his gun from his holster, tossing it on the floor against the wall. Then the man stepped back.

"I see you're surprised to see me," Corbett said, continuing to smile. "I could have taken you any time. You see, one of my men trailed you yesterday. When you came here, he returned to me and told me where you were hiding out.

"It was pretty clever of you. Nobody would have suspected you would stay this close to the Bar 4. That was a pretty little scene between you and Helen Bradley. Too bad you were such a fool. Now you've lost her for good. But then, you always were a fool."

A terrible anger was burning in Masters as he glared across the table at Van Corbett. All the hate he felt for the man suddenly rose in a wave inside him. And time seemed to turn back. He saw himself again in France. The Battle of the Bulge, and his outfit being swiftly surrounded by the enemy.

The order had come through from Regimental HQ to withdraw. Company B had been blanketed down with fire from a German pillbox. There were Panzer tanks coming up from the rear and on both sides to support it. The pillbox had been their objective. But the orders had come to withdraw right now before it was too late.

Corbett had been in command of the Company. Over two hundred men whose lives were his direct responsibility. But that meant nothing to Corbett. He wanted to take that pillbox. He didn't care what it cost. He didn't care if every man died doing it. He tore up the order and ordered an attack.

Masters had been one of the lucky ones. He had escaped with his life. But there were others who hadn t. But for ten men, the entire Company was wiped out. They knocked out the pillbox, and only ten men lived to tell about it.

And where the pillbox had been, lay the bodies of the men of Company B. All good men. Men who deserved to live as much as Corbett. Men who should have lived—men who would have lived, Masters knew, if Corbett had followed orders.

But they were dead. Dead because one man held their lives as a cheap trade for a German pillbox. Because one man wanted glory at any price.

And Corbett had his medal. A piece of silver that was drenched in human blood...

Now, as he stared into the hated features of Corbett, the scene lived again in his mind. And his hatred showed on his face, in his eyes.

"It would have been better for you, Masters, if you had never come back alive," Corbett said coldly, almost as if he had read Masters' thoughts.

Masters felt his hands dampen with sweat. He wanted to get those hands around Corbett's throat. To choke the life from him; to make him pay for the men he had murdered. He started to move around the table.

"Don't make me kill you—just yet," Corbett warned.

And Masters stopped, clenching his fists, his eyes fixed in a terrible rage upon the man across from him.

"What's one more murder to you?" Masters' voice was hoarse as he spoke. But he forced a calm tone to his next words. "Go ahead, you've got a gun. Shoot me. But at least I'll know that you won't get away with what you've been planning in the valley. Bradley and Oakes know you've been behind the rustling. You want power and money the easy way. Well, it won't be so easy from now on."

Corbett laughed, a curt, cold laugh. Then his face twisted in a sneer. "What sort of a fool do you think I am? Bradley and Oakes were over my place with a fine-tooth comb. They found nothing. Every head on my ranch has the Arrow brand on it. And every head will always have the Arrow brand. I'm surprised at you, Masters, really surprised. Even you can t figure it out, can you? Well, maybe before you die, you'd like to know just what I've been doing. Oh yes, don't think I'm going to let you live."

Corbett paused to let his words sink home. Then he continued: "Hasn't it ever struck your mind how close the resemblance is between the Bar 4 brand and the Arrow brand? A 4 is just half of an arrow—and it's really a simple matter to change it. So, you see, there's no way I can be caught. It's that simple.

"And I'll tell you something else, Masters. After tonight, I'll be the biggest rancher in the valley. And it will be strictly legal, with every cow bearing my brand. I'll break Bradley. And maybe even Helen..."

Corbett's words stunned Masters. For a moment, his face showed a puzzled look.

Corbett laughed again. "You're wondering what I'm going to do? You can't figure out how I can rustle off Bradley's stock now that he's guarding against it? Well, you're going to solve that problem for me, Masters. You're going to be a real big help."

"Killing me isn't going to get rid of Bradley for you."

Corbett shook his head. "That's where you're wrong. In just a minute or two, I'm going to tie you up. Nice and neat—and tight. I want you to live to enjoy the situation, to think about it a little before you die. Then I'm going to set fire to the cabin and leave you to enjoy the blaze all by yourself.

"It won't take long for the flames to be seen even from the Bar 4 ranch. And every one of Bradley's men will come running up here to see what's wrong. And when they get here and finally put the fire out, all they'll find will be a few charred bones. Your bones, Masters!"

Corbett paused and watched the amazed shock show on Masters' face. "And while they're busy doing that, my men and I will be at Bottleneck Pass, moving the cattle through. I'll have another man waiting with branding irons on my land. It won't take long. Just a matter of timing and proper planning. You see how simple it is?"

Masters saw. He saw all too well. And a chill swept through him. Corbett was right. It would work that way. Bradley would come running all the way to the burning cabin in the hills. He would be far from the pass and unaware of what was happening there. When he found out, it would be too late.

Even as he thought about it, one of Corbett's men moved behind him. Out of the corner of his eyes, Masters saw the man raise a gun over his head and start to bring it down.

Masters tried to move away from the blow, but he was too late. It caught him a glancing swipe on the side of the head, and pain exploded in his skull. His knees buckled beneath him, and he fell to the floor.

Through a red haze, he was aware him up. He felt his arms being pulled of Corbett instructing the man to tie behind him and his legs drawn up. Then he felt the bite of rope against his wrists and ankles.

It seemed like years before the pain in his head slowly cleared. But then Corbett's man finally straightened up and moved toward the door.

Masters looked through pain-filled eyes as Corbett laughed down at him and picked up the oil lamp from the table. He watched helplessly as Corbett threw the lamp against the far wall and the glass shattered, sending a spray of flame along the wall.

Then Corbett ran to the door and pulled it shut after him.

Moments later, Masters heard the thunder of horses departing into the night.

He stared in fascinated horror at the flames that were already spreading toward the ceiling of the cabin.

THE MINUTES followed each other in slow eternities. And with each minute, the air grew hotter, the flames swelled, and his throat choked with the hot, swirling smoke.

Masters struggled desperately against the ropes that lashed his wrists and legs behind him. But the tough rope was tied too tightly. He felt his hands growing numb as his circulation was shut off by his struggles.

He coughed in burning sobs and tried to roll his body toward the door. But his legs were bent back behind him, his ankles fastened to his wrists with the rope.

He couldn't move.

But the flames could—and did—with a terrifying rapidity.

The window of the cabin exploded in a shower of glass under the pressure of the heat inside. And a gust of air from the night wind fanned the blaze to a greater fury, sending the flames shooting through the window and up the outside of the cabin.

Masters collapsed and lay motionless, fighting for breath, keeping his mouth as close to the floor as he could.

He knew now that it was only a matter of time. Five minutes...ten, at the most. Already, the walls of the cabin were a sheet of raging flame, and the heat overwhelmed him, the smoke burned his throat as he fought to breathe.

It was over. He knew it. But he didn't want to die this way. Not roasted alive.

He seemed to hear Corbett's mocking laughter in the crackle of the flames. He saw the man's cruel features, twisted in his sadistic triumph. And hate for Corbett was a living thing in him. Hate that rose with each spreading tentacle of flame that reached out for him.

He felt his clothing begin to smolder. He felt the hot crispness of death closing in on him. And his senses reeled in an agony of coughing. He prayed then. He prayed that he would pass out. He couldn't stand the inferno much longer...

And then, miraculously, he heard a strange thing. An alien sound that mingled with the roar of the flames. The sound of a horse rapidly approaching.

His senses whirled; he felt himself dipping into a vast red whirlpool. And in the middle of the whirlpool, he heard a voice screaming at him.

"Jack! My God—Jack, are you in there?"

It was Helen's voice. But no, that was impossible. Helen wasn't in this deep pool with him.

"Jack! Jack!"

Helen Bradley shouted the words above the roar of the flames. Then she was at his side and kneeling be-

side him. Her hand went into a pocket at her breast. Through hazy eyes, he saw her open a small knife. He was aware of slashing movements behind him.

And suddenly his arms were free.

The girl was on her feet, coughing, reeling against the heat and smoke.

But she dragged him up with her, and stumbled with his partly unconscious figure across the room.

The doorway was a sheet of flame when they crashed through it. He felt the hot bite of fire on his face, felt it singe his eyelashes and hair.

Then they were out in the cool night wind.

His feet stumbled over the ground as the girl led him away from the burning cabin. And he collapsed to the ground.

He lay there sucking in deep draughts of life-giving air. And gradually, the fire in his lungs seemed to fade away. And his head cleared, and strength flowed through his arms and legs. He moved slowly to his feet and stood beside the girl.

He could see where her hair had been singed, where spots on her clothing had smoldered in the intense heat. And then he saw nothing but her eyes. And the fear in them. And—

"Jack! My God—what happened? I was riding home. I looked back and saw the red glare; I knew it must be the cabin..."

He told her then. In hoarse words, he told her. And as he gasped out what had happened, he saw her face grow pale and angry. An intensity of anger that he had never dreamed she possessed.

"The fiend! We've got to get him!"

Masters looked at the flaming cabin. And his hand went to the empty holster at his side. If he only had a gun. But his gun was in there, a thing of red hot metal by now. Lying where his charred body would have been in only a few more short moments.

He gripped the girl's arm. "We've got to stop your father and the men!" he shouted at her, and shoved her toward her horse. "We've got to get them to Bottleneck Pass before Corbett can carry out his plan! He won't be expecting interference now!"

The girl mounted as he ran to his own horse a short distance away The sorrel was stamping the ground and snorting in fear of the fire. He loosened the reins and eased himself into the saddle, patting the animal's neck.

Then he was riding after the girl, away from the inferno behind them.

THEY MET Bradley and the Bar 4 riders halfway to the ranch.

Masters pulled his horse in sharply and halted beside the girl.

"Dad!" Helen Bradley shouted. "Corbett...he tied Jack in the cabin ...set it on fire. He...he's trying to draw you and the men away from the valley. He—"

"What on earth is this all about, Masters? What is Helen talking about?"

Masters told him in clipped phrases. And as he spoke, he heard the men of the Bar 4 mutter angrily. When he had finished, Walt Bradley turned to the girl.

"Helen, get back to the ranch. This is going to be a fight where men are going to die—and by God, I'll see to it that they do! Call Oakes and tell him what's happened. Tell him that for once I'm not waiting for the law."

Masters felt his pulse leap at the tone Bradley used. There was fight in the rancher now. And for the first time, Masters felt that Bradley appreciated his own feelings about Corbett.

"I've got to have a gun!" Masters said.

One of the punchers rode forward and tossed him a sixgun. Masters

caught it and slipped it into his holster. And then he saw Helen ride off toward the ranch.

"Jack, you say Corbett and his men are at Bottleneck Pass?"

Masters nodded to Bradley. "We've got to move fast. I figure the best way is to get them from the front. We can split up in two groups. You take half the men and cover the front end. I'll take the other half and cut in from the side."

Bradley nodded at Masters' words. "You're right. Well, what are we waiting for?"

In a moment, the men had formed into two groups. Bradley rode off at the head of one. Masters led the second.

The sound of their riding was like thunder in the night.

MASTERS brought his men up short as they came to the turn of the last hill. He knew by now that Bradley and the others would have reached their position at the front of the pass and would be ready to attack. There would be only one way for Corbett's men still inside the valley to leave. And they would have to pass Masters and his men in their retreat.

He could hear the lowing of the cattle and the pounding of their hoofs as they were hustled through the pass around the base of the hill. He could even hear the hoarse shouts of Corbett's men as they forced the cattle to move faster.

And behind him, he heard the tense swearing of his men. He looked at them, saw the guns in their hands, the anger on their faces.

And he drew his own gun.

Almost in the same instant came the crash of gunfire from over the hill. And with the sound, Masters moved into action. Bradley had struck from the front!

He spurred his horse and shot around the base of the hill and onto the floor of the valley. Behind him, he heard the Bar 4 men follow.

In the pale moonlight, he saw the milling cattle crowding the pass, lowing madly as the gunfire frightened them. They tried to turn in the narrow pass, but the press of those behind blocked the channel in a mass of struggling animals.

The gunfire grew in volume. And then Masters saw a group of Corbett's men skirting the cattle on the far side.

But even as he saw them, so did the Bar 4 men. A shout went up from them, and they rode around him, their guns barking as they hurried to cut off Corbett's riders.

But Masters did not follow them. He pulled up sharply.

His eyes were fixed on a rider at the far end of the milling cattle. And as he looked, even though the distance was great and the light dim, he knew that man.

Corbett.

A curse flowed from Masters' throat as he looked at the figure in the distance. Then he saw Corbett wheel his horse and suddenly cut diagonally across the valley.

Instantly, Masters knew what was in his mind. He was heading for the left side, toward the pass that led to the Bar 4 ranch!

Masters spurred his horse in pursuit, his gun tense in his hand. He knew there was no use in firing at the distance that separated him from Corbett. He would have to wait, to get closer to the man.

Masters urged his horse with his spurs and felt the sorrel respond. The distance between Corbett and himself diminished.

And behind him, he heard the thunder of gunshots fading with distance, but not in intensity.

And ahead, he saw Corbett look behind him.

Almost at once, Corbett's horse seemed to gather speed, and the gap between the two men grew greater.

Masters tried to make his horse run faster, but already the animal was laboring.

The minutes passed, and ahead Masters saw the dim sparkle of lights from the Bar 4 ranch house. They were in the pass connecting the valley to the ranch, and Corbett was already through it.

Masters felt a sudden fear sweep through him. Helen was at the ranch. And if she happened to hear them—to come outside when Corbett rode by...

He shot at Corbett's racing figure. But it was useless. Accuracy was impossible at the distance that still separated them.

And then he saw Corbett reach the ranch yard. He stared in surprise as the other jerked his horse to a stop and jumped to the ground.

Corbett's move became apparent even as the distance shortened. He saw the man run for the station wagon parked beside the corral. And his heart seemed to freeze. For he knew he would never be able to stop Corbett if he got the car moving ahead of him.

Savagely, he cut on a sharp diagonal that brought him closer to the ranch yard. And as he reached it, he saw the car begin to move.

His gun spat a blast of flame at the station wagon. It slued to a stop, and Corbett leaned from the window.

A gun in Corbett's hand took careful aim.

Masters saw the flash of flame as it exploded.

Instinctively, he ducked lower in the saddle.

He felt a thud beneath him. The same sort of thud he had felt that other night when his horse was killed

And even as his horse collapsed, he knew the bullet had struck the animal.

He felt himself sprawl over the sorrel's head as it hit the ground in a thudding crash. Then he was rolling across the grass, his gun flying from his nerveless fingers.

He tried to get up, but he was too shaken. The world seemed to spin in a reeling arc before his eyes.

He was dimly aware that Corbett was laughing at him. Then he heard the sound of a car motor. He forced himself to his knees, trying frantically to focus his eyes.

What he saw brought a chill of fear to him.

Corbett was behind the wheel of the station wagon, and swinging the car around to face him. He was gunning the motor, heading straight for him.

Masters knew that he could never move away fast enough. Corbett was running him down with the car, and in a few seconds it would reach him. Then...

A flashing figure ran across the grass from the ranch house. The figure stopped suddenly, and there was the glint of a rifle in the moonlight.

Helen Bradley was aiming that rifle at the station wagon!

Masters' eyes flicked back to the car. It was only a short distance away—too late for anything to stop it!

There was a sharp crack of the rifle spat into the night. And in the pale glow of the moon, Masters saw Corbett jerk sideways behind the wheel of the car.

And in the same instant, the station wagon veered in its course.

Even as it reached him, even as he threw his body desperately to the side, it veered. He felt a numbness as the front fender caught him a glancing blow that knocked him sprawling

in a big wave of bitter, rolling pain.

He felt a great darkness closing over him, but he fought against it, tried desperately to retain his senses.

And through swimming eyes, he saw the station wagon leap across the ranch yard, out of control. And then suddenly there was a terrific rending smash of sound as it struck a tree head-on.

Then there was quiet. Quiet and the spinning darkness that spread over him. Quiet that was broken only by running feet and a terrified voice crying out to him. "Jack! *Jack!*"

Then there was nothing...

THE DOCTOR stepped away from the couch and Masters grinned crookedly up at him. "Think I'll live?"

The doctor shrugged and turned to Walt Bradley, Helen and Sheriff Tod Oakes. "No broken bones. He's just suffering from some heavy bruises and shock. A little rest will fix him up fine."

Walt Bradley, his arm around his daughter, said, "Van Corbett is dead, Jack. Killed in the crash."

Masters looked at the girl, saw her bite her lips, and knew what she was thinking. She was thinking of the rifle bullet that had saved his life, the bullet that may very well have ended Corbett's—before the crash.

"Guess you won't have to worry none about that murder charge now, Masters," the sheriff told him. "Seems like you was right all along. But mind you, that's still no excuse to take the law in your own hands!"

Masters looked at the sheriff's gruff features, and smiled. He thought of Van Corbett. Corbett, who was now dead. Corbett, who had paid, finally, for another crime that only he knew about. The dead could rest easy now...

And then he felt soft arms around his neck, and he looked into Helen Bradley's tear-brimmed eyes

"Jack, can you forgive me for what I said earlier tonight? I...I didn't really mean it. I don't want anything to ever come between us again—"

He stopped her words with his lips.

And neither of them heard as Walt Bradley, the sheriff and the doctor walked out of the room.

THE END

WESTERN INGENUITY

★ By A. DOBE ★

THE BUFFALO hunters of the West exposed themselves to many hazards. Not the least of these was the ferocious, all-enveloping blizzards that would sweep down on the prairies destroying every living thing in their path. There was one way a man might save himself from freezing to death. This was by burying himself within the carcass, still dripping with blood, of a freshly killed pony or a buffalo bull!

Buffalo hunters, too, were often trapped by raging prairie fires against which nothing could stand. Several men are known to have resisted the fire by burying themselves to the neck in their water barrels at the temporary camps.

Chiggers were kept from men by sprinkling sulpher powder in boots and pants legs. When there was no grass due to drouth or too close clipping, cattlemen would burn the nettles and spines from prickly pear, giving their animals at least enough to survive.

The ability to improvise, to think ingeniously, was closely associated with Western impatience. Why bury a dead animal? Let the sun and the wind and the buzzards take care of him. Old-timers can tell tales of the days when whole prairies would be littered with the snow-white bones of tens of thousands of head of cattle or horses who had died in a blizzard. In fact, the bones of these animals provided an early form of bone fertilizer. Yes, the old Westerners demonstrated real ingenuity.

MUD AND QUICKSAND

★ By JUNE LURIE ★

RIDERS OF the range must keep on the lookout, especially during the spring season, for animals which have become mired. Mudholes and patches of quicksand have caused the death of many cattle.

As long as the ground is frozen hard, miring is not a problem; but when the spring thaws come, cowboys must guard the cattle from a new danger. As the ice breaks up in the streams, the edges are oftentimes deep bogs, and quicksand is at its most treacherous. Every seeping spring becomes a quagmire, and the bottom of every gully is a danger spot full of sticky, slimy mud of great tenacity.

In the springtime, the cattle are in no condition to recognize and fight these dangers. They are apt to be weak from the rigors of the winter season, and having had very little water to drink for the past three or four months, only snow to quench their thirst, they rush eagerly and heedlessly into any pool of water they see. They stand there soaking in the water, and drinking gallons of it, all the time sinking deeper and deeper into the mud or sand.

When they have drunk their fill, and are ready to leave, they find that they cannot budge. Struggling and floundering around only mires them more deeply, and they weaken fast. Unless discovered very soon by the cowboy, and rescued in short order, they are apt to give in to their fate apathetically, and die resignedly.

So the cowboys watch these danger spots at all times, but especially are they on the lookout in the springtime, when there are mud traps everywhere, and the quicksand of even a tiny creek has strength enough to hold a cow fast.

When an animal is found stuck in mud or quicksand, the unfortunate beast is roped and then the horse hauls it out. Sometimes it takes several men on horseback to rescue an animal that has become deeply bogged.

FISTS AGAINST SIXGUNS

★ By CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT ★

WHEN THE city fathers first tried to bring law and order to that hell-town, Abilene, they used the Irish ex-cop, Bear River Tom. It is a well-known fact that he was able to quell most of the disorder in the town with nothing more than his fists. For some reason, the cowboys felt it was a greater disgrace to get knocked in the jaw, than to get shot with a sixgun.

After Bear River Tom was ambushed, Abilene went right back to its old ways. Everybody wore guns, and the bloodshed mounted. Wild Texan cowhands drew and fired at the sound of a word. Things got so desperate, that the mayor finally called in another gunman—this time, one who didn't use his fists—Wild Bill Hickock.

When Wild Bill came into town, he decided to clean up in his own way, which meant that the sixgun was his tool. He didn't try to prevent the boys from carrying guns, as did Bear River Tom. As a matter of fact, he encouraged it. It certainly gave him an opportunity to demonstrate his virtuosity with the two guns he carried. Wild Bill was fast and accurate, and he didn't hesitate to call for a showdown with any man.

In spite of his actions, lawlessness in Abilene didn't decrease. If anything, it became worse. The fact that everybody wore guns, seemed to accentuate the fearlessness of the average cowboy when he got into trouble. The first thing he did was to reach for his gun and let it speak for him. Words were too cheap.

Wild Bill did his best to keep the town down. But when he shot down Phil Coe and then, in the dim light of the saloon, by mistake gunned his deputy and friend, Mike Williams, Wild Bill Hickock realized that perhaps he had been wrong, and that drastic steps would have to be taken. He used Bear River Tom's remedy. He forbade the wearing of guns within the town's limits. This seemed to work, especially since it was backed up by a couple of double-barreled shotguns. From then on, Wild Bill kept Abilene under control.

The whole affair shows a peculiar fact. The sense of ancient chivalry that seems to have been a part of cowboy living was demonstrated by the standard western practice of carrying a gun. The trouble was that the gun was always used to settle quarrels, no matter how slight. In a way, it harked back to the days of the knights, when quarrels were settled with drawn swords which all men carried at all times.

But Bear River Tom's habit of using his fists, somehow seemed to take the steam out of men. No matter how tough they are, personal combat is far harder to face than the practice of reaching for a gun. It is one thing to shoot a man from a distance; it is another to go and battle with him hand to hand. Even the cowboys didn't care for the latter. Wild Bill Hickock never really learned that. He relied on the gun. But time has proven that the gunfighter is a grossly distorted type of person. The gun may be a "great equalizer", but it also permits cowards to engage in dirty work. Fists over sixguns win in the long run!

The Memoirs of John Shevlin

The Case of The Man Called "Brain"

I WISH I had a dollar for every time I've been told that crime *could* be made to pay. This statement is usually advanced by the individual who has been successful in business and feels he is expounding an original theory concerning crime.

But the theory isn't original, and the argument backing it up is always the same. The theorist will point a finger and say, "The reason criminals always end up behind the eight ball is that they're stupid. They've got no brains. If they had the judgement and ability of the average business man—if they'd put crime on a sensible business basis—they'd be successful at it. That's only common sense. You can't beat brains."

No, you can't beat brains. Every time I hear that, I think of Marion Hedgepeth. As a matter of fact, that's what he was called in the underworld—The Brain. He had judgment and ability far above that of an average business man. He put crime on a business basis to such an extent, he had the St. Louis police wandering around in complete befuddlement. Marion Hedgepeth was a rousing success in his chosen calling. But...

He was born in 1865 in the backwoods of Cooper County, Missouri. Little is known of his boyhood except that he was one of the minor hoodlums of his community. Probably the type who got filled up with red-eye and broke up picnics and church gatherings together with other hoodlums.

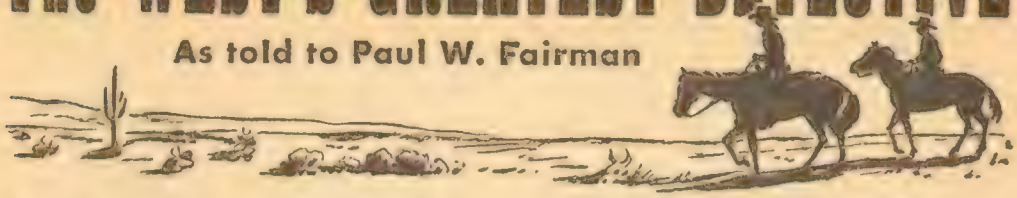
He served jail terms before he reached maturity, and he did a postgraduate stretch in the Kansas City, Missouri jail around the time of his twenty-first birthday.

Hedgepeth quickly lost any rural gaukiness he may have brought with him from the hills. He was definitely not a hick doing time in the big town. It's possible that he went into the K.C. pokey as a rural, but when he came out, he was strictly an urbanite in dress, manner, and thinking. And he must have done a lot of thinking in jail, because he came out with ideas and plans that kept experienced detectives guessing for a long, long time.

He decided, as a result of his observations, that the average criminal was an addle-pate, a stupid blunderer, a quarter-wit without sense to step in out of the hot sun. It was these characters who filled jails, he figured. Now, if you put criminal activities on a business basis...

The WEST'S GREATEST DETECTIVE

As told to Paul W. Fairman



MARION HEDGEPETH went about doing just that.

He ranged over the entire United States forming his gang. He interviewed criminals the way an executive interviews applicants for an important job. Each had to be the best man obtainable in his line. And, also, the personal habits of the applicants came under Hedgepeth's close scrutiny. He wanted no trigger-happy characters in his gang, and no booze hounds. He wanted solid, clever men who could look at crime through his eyes—as a business enterprise.

After three years of patient searching, sifting and eliminating, he gathered a gang which, from his point of view, was more than worth all the effort he'd gone to. His group consisted of: *John (Dink) Wilson*—A soup man deluxe, Wilson was. What he didn't know about nitro-glycerin, dynamite and other explosives, wasn't worth knowing. Also, he had thus far shown exceptional talent at keeping his nose clean. He'd only served one short term at Jefferson City, Missouri, and only served the minimum time on his term because of good behavior.

Adelbert D. Slye—This man, older than Hedgepeth, was a safe expert. He had the most sensitive fingertips yet encountered. He knew safes and locks backwards and forwards. And, he was a non-smoker and a teetotaler.

Jimmie Francis—Jimmie was a gunman, pure and simple. But he had a positive genius for not getting caught. Definitely known to the police as having been involved in three killings, Francis had never spent a day in jail. It was said in the underworld that Francis had to have an iron-clad alibi before he'd even go to bed.

Now, the Hedgepeth gang was ready to start operating. It is believed that they cracked their first safe in Buffalo, New York, and had so much luck that they kept right on cracking safes until they broke their twenty-fifth one. At that time, Buffalo had such an epidemic of cracked boxes, that insurance rates sky-rocketed, and the police settled down to a grim fight with this daring and clever gang.

But, suddenly, the raids stopped. Overnight, it seemed, Buffalo businessmen began coming to work and finding their valuables intact.

IMMEDIATELY, things got bad in Toledo, Ohio. Wilson's nitro-glycerin, Slye's feather touch, and Hedgepeth's brains, all covered by Francis' guns, began cracking safes like sardine cans.

The police started to work again. They went through the usual motions and banged into a stone wall. Stool pigeons were of no value, because this gang didn't associate with stool pigeons. They didn't hang out in saloons; they didn't visit bagnios nor hobnob with low characters of

any description. In fact, they didn't do any of the things the garden variety of crook is known to do.

And insurance rates went up in Toledo.

With democratic lack of discrimination, the gang started a series of visits to a great many eastern cities. To qualify for their attentions, a town merely had to have safes to be opened.

The gang hit St. Louis late in 1891. I was a detective sergeant with the St. Louis police force at the time, and when those safes began popping, I never worked harder in my life. Every other officer on the force worked harder and they never got such negligible results.

Larry Harrigan, at that time Chief of Police in St. Louis, had forty men roaming the city in plain clothes, with but one order: Get a line on this gang. Most of them, myself included, were ashamed to collect their salaries.

The raids stopped here as suddenly as they had begun. Then, early in 1892, a Frisco passenger train was held up at the Glendale station in Union County, Missouri, just west of St. Louis. Four bandits were involved. They dynamited the express car, wounded the express messenger, and escaped with $40,000.

We didn't know at the time, of course, that this raid was the work of Hedgepeth's "business organizations," but, in order to tell the story clearly, it is necessary to jump a period of time and state, here, some facts that came to light at a much later date.

That train robbery was the last criminal enterprise of Hedgepeth and his associates as a gang. They'd gone into business, had been most successful, and were now retiring.

And now the fallacy in the business-crime argument becomes apparent. This fallacy consists of two points:

First, when a business man retires, his deals are all washed up and done with. They are finished and no one cares about them. He can retire and forget about them. Because everyone else has.

BUT WITH the criminal, it's different. No matter how clever his manipulations have been, he can never rest in peace, because there is someone who continues to remember them.

The police.

The law goes right on hunting for the criminal, whether he has retired or not.

And second, a businessman can make mistakes—a common failing of every human being—and all it costs him is money. He takes his loss and recoups in the next deal, usually.

When the man beyond the law makes a mistake, it can easily be his last one. The police are watching for his mistakes twenty-four hours a day. He may make but one in his entire career, but that one will be the end of him. It's an odds-on chance that the police will find it. There are so many hunting.

In Hedgepeth's case, his mistake could hardly be called that. He strictly avoided the stool pigeons of the underworld, but he forgot that honest people also have curiosity and have access to the police.

Some months after the Glendale train robbery, a lady who lived on Swan Avenue in St. Louis called up and asked that a policeman be sent to her home. Maybe she was just

lonely and wanted to talk to someone, or possibly she was a conscientious citizen with a slow mind. We'll never know now.

Anyhow, I accompanied a detective named Sam Allender on a visit to the lady. Allender was specially detailed on the Hedgepeth case, and I was unassigned at the time.

Through her front window, the lady pointed out a house next door and told us, "I may be wasting your time. But since there has been so much talk about safe robbers, I've begun wondering about the people who used to live over there."

Allender asked the questions. "Why have you become suspicious of them?"

"Because they kept such off hours and didn't seem to have any visible means of support."

This sounded pretty flimsy, but Allender kept digging. "Anything else?"

"Well, they weren't neighborly at all. They were a woman and her husband, and when I tried to be neighborly, they held me off. They weren't rude, but they just weren't interested in being friendly."

Allender reminded her that plenty of entirely honest people like to keep to themselves.

"I know," she said, "but they had visitors at all hours. There were three men who came and went as though they owned the place. Yet, I'm sure they didn't live there."

Allender thanked her and we left. He didn't feel that we had anything, and neither did I. It was a lead identical to dozens of others that had proved to be complete duds.

HE FOLLOWED it up, however, as a matter of routine. He located the owner of the house in question and called on him. The man, a Leroy Perkins, said he'd rented the house to a fine looking gentleman named R. H. Fitzroy. The deal had been made in mid-October of the previous year, and Fitzroy had paid a year's rent in advance. Perkins, who hadn't bothered his tenants after that, was surprised to hear that they were no longer occupying the house.

"Probably off somewhere on a visit," he said. "They're fine people. Absolutely the best."

Allender visited the house, with the owner, and they found it to be filled with the most lavish and expensive furniture. Mr. Fitzroy was obviously a man of means.

Allender began to perk up now. There was one point that interested him very much. The dates involved. The house had been rented shortly before the epidemic of the St. Louis safe robberies. And it had been vacated, according to the lady next door, shortly after the Glendale train robbery.

Allender continued on his dogged way. Labels of the furniture led him to an exclusive furniture house in town where he again bumped into the name of the elusive Fitzroy. The man and his wife had selected the furniture personally and had paid cash. They were fine people.

Returning to the home of the lady next door, Allender asked whether or not she had witnessed the exodus of these people. Had they left in a cab or afoot? Had a drayman called for their luggage?

A drayman had called. But all the lady could remember was the fact that he'd had a green wagon and one white horse. The other horse had been either brown or black, she wasn't sure.

Allender began making the rounds of cartage companies. And there were a great many cartage companies in St. Louis. And what made Allender's job so tough, was the fact that many of them were one-man, one-wagon outfits that were hard to track down. A lot of these small-fry hauled wood, coal, and whatever they could get to haul. They operated out of saloons, junk yards, and even grocery stores.

Allender chased green dray wagons until he was on speaking terms with practically the whole industry. It took him over a month to find the one he wanted.

This carrier—whose name I no longer remember—was unique in that he kept records. He operated out of Barney Taft's saloon. When Allender braced him on the old call, he opened the seat of his wagon and dug through a myriad of order slips until he found one bearing the name of Mr. Fitzroy. Yes, he'd picked up two trunks and a few suitcases for that party and delivered them to the Union Station.

ALLENDER was elated. The work was paying off. Then he went to the Union Station and banged into a brick wall. They had no record of Mr. Fitzroy's luggage there. It could have come into the station without being recorded, but the officials there stoutly maintained that it was never placed on any outgoing carrier. Had this been done, their files would show the date and point of destination.

Evidently, Mr. Fitzroy had either changed his mind about leaving the city, or he had been cagey enough to retrieve the luggage in case of a tail and had shipped it in some less obtrusive manner.

Allender got pretty glum about the whole affair. Two months' work down the drain. Then, too, there was the maddening uncertainty of the thing. Now, he'd never know but what he'd been chasing the wrong man all the time. It was most discouraging.

Then fate, possibly tired of kicking Allender around, decided to give the harrassed lawman a lift. This came in the form of a break in the case; in fact, two breaks from two entirely different directions.

One morning, Allender got a phone call at police headquarters in the old Four Courts Building. It was the drayman. He said, "I got a letter from Mrs. Fitzroy. Thought you might be interested. She says she's going to pick up her trunk before long."

Allender's head was spinning. "What trunk?"

"The one I'm holding for her," came the calm reply. "She's coming to get it."

"You didn't tell me you were holding a trunk for her!" Allender roared.

"You didn't ask me," the drayman replied, unruffled. "There was one big one they didn't think they could handle, so they asked me if I'd store it until they called for it. I put it in a room over the saloon. Anything wrong in that?"

The second break came when two neighborhood children, digging up the dirt floor of the carriage house behind the Fitzroy residence, unearthed two revolvers and several canvas money bags. These were turned over to the police, and the bags properly identified as having come from the baggage car of the robbed Frisco passenger train.

ALL ALLENDER could do now was wait and pray. He haunted Barney Taft's saloon, where the trunk in question had been opened and found to contain furs valued at several thousand dollars.

Allender had bitten his nails to the quick, when the phone call finally came. A lady asked for the drayman and told him to deliver the trunk to the Union Station where she'd be waiting to receive it.

On a chance that she would not be alone, four detectives filtered into the depot fully armed and ready to lower the beam. There, caution was unnecessary, however. The woman was alone. She was taken into custody, where she revealed that she had come from California to retrieve her property.

She would give no information concerning her husband's whereabouts. She proved to be a most stubborn and uncooperative prisoner. She claimed that she knew nothing whatsoever about her husband's activities or his associates.

Her front broke only once, when she was tricked into admitting that the name Fitzroy was an alias. Her husband's real name was Marion Hedgepeth. It was discovered later that the woman was also the sister of Adelbert Slye.

Her husband did not appear, but neither did he leave her to shift for herself. Through a Kansas City lawyer, he arranged for her defense when she was indicted and scheduled for trial as an accessory in the Glendale train robbery.

This lawyer, in turn, handed the case to a St. Louis law firm. The St. Louis police then dispatched a decoy letter purporting to be from the St. Louis lawyers. By this ruse, Police Captain William Lee, of San Francisco, was able to locate and arrest the fugitive.

Marion Hedgepeth was returned to St. Louis where he became the center of interest relative to the case. His wife's trial was never held. The authorities felt that, with the larger fist in the net, it would be a waste of public money to bother with her.

Hedgepeth remained close-mouthed throughout all the preliminary questioning, his indictment before the grand jury, and the trial itself.

His stock-in-trade answer was, "I don't remember." It got monotonous for both the spectators and the jury.

The trial lasted two weeks, and it was said that Hedgepeth's counsel did a poor job; that they seemed only half-hearted in protecting the interests of their client. If this was true, the police charged it up to the fact that Hedgepeth refused to cooperate even with his own attorneys. He "remembered" no more for them than he did for the police interrogaters. Lawyers can do little when they get no cooperation from their client.

The jury deliberated for three hours at the conclusion of the trial, then brought in a verdict of guilty. Hedgepeth was now a convicted train robber. Twenty years in prison.

LODGED temporarily in the Four Courts jail, he remained close-mouthed. As it turned out, he had no intention of staying in the jail. One night, someone on the outside spread the bars of a window directly opposite the offices of Chief Larry Harrigan.

Inside, Hedgepeth fashioned a wooden key. This he used to unlock the door of his cell between rounds of the guard, and escaped into the bull-pen, a narrow corridor complete-

ly surrounding the building, just outside the cell tiers.

But the escape came to naught. Hedgepeth was captured while sneaking from window to window, trying to find the one that had been jimmied.

He now became a changed man. Evidently, he had banked heavily upon the escape attempt. When it was foiled, he immediately began warbling like a lark, attempting in every way to ingratiate himself with the authorities.

He told of the gang's exploits both in St. Louis and eastern cities. He named the members of his gang, and told the police all the details of the breakup after the Glendale train robbery. He was as helpful as possible in predicting where the law might lay hands on them.

It is doubtful, however, that this sudden flood of information would have helped him at this point. Deals like that usually have to be made before the trial, not afterwards.

But then, Hedgepeth got a lift from an entirely different direction. While he was being held at Four Courts, a second prisoner was housed in the cell with him, a multi-murderer named H. H. Holmes.

This arch-fiend was shunned even by hardened inmates of the prison. The worst of them could not stomach his callous brutality. Thus, he was happy at finding an apparent friend in Hedgepeth, to whom he unburdened his soul.

Hedgepeth relayed the information to Chief Harrigan and, as a direct result, Holmes was convicted of murdering no less than thirty-four people in order to collect insurance. Among his victims were several young children.

For this piece of work, Chief Harrigan got a few years lapped off Hedgepeth's sentence.

And in 1905, Hedgepeth was pardoned by Governor Joseph W. Folk of Missouri.

AND NOW the exponent of "businesslike crime" might well lean forward and say, "So what? The career of this man proves that I'm right. He operated shrewdly and amassed an enormous fortune from criminal activities. Then he was captured and served a term in prison. On a basis of financial return, he was well payed for those years behind bars. He no doubt became a free man with more money than a whole community makes in a lifetime. I still say that crime paid him well."

Is that so? Well, let's follow on through.

Hedgepeth could easily have been arrested at the prison entrance on the day of his release by any number of eastern police officers. He wasn't, however. A lot of time had passed, and the case was pretty cold. He dropped from sight and was not heard of for years.

Then, one bitterly cold night in 1915, a seedily dressed man, gaunt from hunger, entered a Chicago saloon and drew a gun from his pocket. He threw down on the barkeep. "Stick 'em up."

At that moment, a patrolman passed by outside and looked in. He dropped the would-be thief with one shot through the brain. The body was taken to the morgue and fingerprinted, and identified as that of a train robber named Marion Hedgepeth.

Exit the leader.

Of the others, only Adelbert Slye was apprehended. He was uncovered in Oakland, California, operating a

saloon under the name of Denton. He stood trial for a Glendale robbery and also drew twenty years. He died in prison.

Two down.

Dink Wilson, continually on the lam, moved from city to city, living like a scared rabbit, watching every face, jumping at every shadow. Finally a bundle of nerves, he was walking down a street in Rochester, New York, one day. His down-at-the-heel appearance was so impressive that a roving detective stopped him for questioning. Wilson's pent-up nerves exploded. He snatched out his gun and put a slug in the cop's brain.

They dealt him the black ace for that one. He died in the electric chair.

One to go.

Jimmie Francis, the trigger-boy, took his split at the Swan Street address and hit out for himself. He could have ridden safely on the plush, but he was over-cautious and chose the box car route.

Quite a while later, at Lamar, Missouri, Francis swung up into a freight car and was spotted by a railroad dick. The policeman ran toward the train just as it pulled out. Francis saw freedom ahead, jail behind. He shot the policeman dead as that unsuspecting man tried to climb into the car.

A posse boarded a special train and followed the freight, overtaking it at Fort Scott, Kansas. Bringing it to a halt, they took no chances. Operating on the theory that Francis was still aboard, they riddled the freight car with slugs until it looked like a rolling sieve.

An odd twist now capped the case; a twist indicating that possibly God looks after the innocent.

Upon boarding the car, authorities found Francis dead from four bullet wounds. But a young bindle stiff, also riding in the car, was crouched, terror stricken, in one corner, entirely unhurt.

So—crime on a business basis or any other basis. You can have it. I don't want it. It's too tough for me.

Editor's Note: Next in the series of John Shevlin's memoirs, will be "The Case of the Perjuring Witnesses" (November 1949, MAMMOTH WESTERN.)

THE COWBOY BOOT

★ By WES TURNER ★

A LOT OF people, not knowing the score, have laughed at the high-heeled cowboy boot, not realizing that it is actually a scientifically designed piece of footwear. And many who have done the laughing, are learning that the wearing of such a boot is now being done far from the flat prairie plains—in colleges and schools and cities everywhere. There is good reason for this.

A typical cowboy boot is a comfortable chunk of footwear. It rides as easy as a slipper on the foot, it's loose and smooth in the heel, and its rigid sole supports the arch. Furthermore, it is practical as a guard against wet and cold, and stones, cactus and snakes can't penetrate it. For wear in the saddle, it is perfect. It locks itself into the stirrup, with the rigid arch eliminating all strain against the arch. And for modern wear, as in driving an automobile, it is sensible. It protects the ankle against drafts and keeps the foot from cramping and freezing. In other words, it is eminently suited to a life requiring little walking but much driving, either of horse or of automobile.

The cowboy boot has been adopted and modified for use today. With a little lower heel, it is a favorite of flying officers. This started during the war when so many Texans enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force and in the Royal Air Force. They insisted on wearing their original western boots as a sort of lucky token. The habit caught on.

The GHOST and MR. GANDER

Seems strange, doesn't it, that a horse can feel who's the villain and who's the good guy? But then, Bob Brill's Ghost is not just an ordinary horse.

The horse's ears flattened and he whirled like a flash, his front hoofs pushing the man down

By Frances M. Deegan

THE MAN said, "I know it's askin' a lot, Brill. But you helped us out once before on Squaw Crick. And seems like we need you to kind of get us goin'. It ain't that we're afraid to fight these toughs..."

He stood close to the glowing stove in Tom Ryan's print shop, resting first one worn boot and then the other on the shelf-like iron base, until the small front office reeked with the smell of scorched leather.

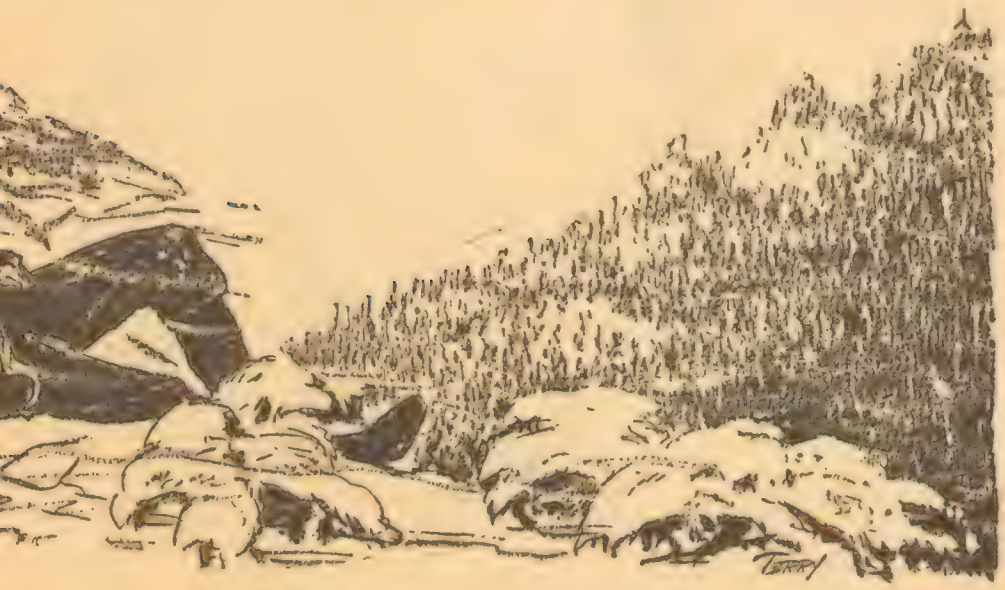
Tom Ryan regarded him with a puckered scowl. The man was pinched with fatigue and cold, and his sunken eyes were worried and apologetic as he searched the face of the big Texan leaning on the worn pine counter opposite Ryan.

Brill's angular face was unreadable. High cheek bones over slightly hollowed cheeks were balanced by a strong, square jaw. His mouth was wide, but trouble had drawn lines around it, giving the corners a tight down-twist that looked as dangerous as his eyes. Their piercing blackness was accentuated by his habit of half-squinting in a fixed stare that seemed to bore through a man without ever letting that man see past their hard brilliance.

"You've got to understand, Schilling, that my situation has changed considerably since you saw me last," he said softly. "All that time I spent riding the trail and collecting evidence against the Texas cattle thieves, I was free to help you or anybody else they victimized."

"When you led the raid on that trail camp, we never expected to get all our cows back," Schilling said admiringly. "Fact is, we found out later, we'd got back more'n we lost. That was—"

"But that Texas outfit is busted up now," Brill interrupted firmly. "There'll be no more gun hands driving stolen cattle up the trail and picking up herds along the way. That



part of my job is done. But I've still got a big job to do here in Hawk River Valley. This is where the stolen beef—including mine—wound up. This was the headquarters of the gang. They controlled this county seat and the whole valley, and until I've cleaned out the last of them at this end, my job won't be done. I can't quit until it is done."

Tom Ryan's red monkey face relaxed, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he began to gather up the scratch paper on which he had been making notes for the Sixth Anniversary issue of the Calypso *Gazette*. It was to be a mammoth eight-page edition, but he was having considerable difficulty finding enough copy to fill twice the usual number of pages, in spite of recent revolutionary events in the Valley.

He was annoyed with Schilling. The little man's troubles were a long way from the town of Calypso and the man-sized job of cleaning up the big Hawk River cattle country. Bob Brill had made a name for himself all up and down the trail, from Texas to Wyoming, as a ruthless, two-gun fighter against crime and injustice, while he was hunting down the men who had murdered and robbed his father. But that was no reason why every two-bit rancher between the Hawk River and the Rio Grande should feel free to call on him whenever they had a little trouble. After two months of close association with the big, soft-spoken, hard-eyed Texan, Tom Ryan had a proprietary interest in him, and resented any other claims on the tough fighter.

SCHILLING had both feet on the floor now, bracing himself against his weariness. He had ridden nearly two hundred miles in quest of Bob Brill, and now he had the long, cold ride back again. The hope was draining out of him there beside the hot stove, like water out of a thawing wooden bucket.

He lifted heavy eyes, and stared bleakly out the window at the two horses standing at the hitchrack. His own jaded nag was slumped and shivering beside the magnificent white stallion whose presence had told him where to find Brill. The Ghost was as well known as his master. And the contrast between the two horses served now to indicate the vast difference between the affairs of a man like Bob Brill and the troubles of a handful of small ranchers on Squaw Creek.

"We all know you got your own troubles," Schilling said diffidently.

"It's not that!" Brill's quiet voice had a snap in it. "Getting back my stolen cattle is only part of the job. The least part. I've got an obligation here. When Sheriff Burgman absconded, along with the other county officials, I was appointed acting sheriff. Right now, we've got a little rustler trouble. That's why I've got to stay here."

"Burgman," said Schilling unhappily. "That's the name of the feller that bought out Vince Pell, an' moved in with his crew of hard-case rannies. An' now, he claims the agreement the rest of us ranchers had with Pell don't hold. He's ordered everybody off the range, an' we got to fight fer it. Old Vince himself is gone, out to his son in Californy."

Brill was suddenly very still. "What does this Burgman look like?"

Ryan put down his notes carefully and braced himself against the counter. He had a newsman's nose for trouble, and it was twitching now.

"Why," Schilling turned wearily, "he's a big feller, heavy set, with kind of pale eyes—mean eyes—an undershot jaw an' a gold tooth in

front. His men call him Gamber, or Gander—somethin' like that."

Ryan let out a heavy breath and met Brill's piercing black eyes. "Uh-huh," he said glumly. "That's him. Gander Burgman. Wonder how come he picked that location to start up in the cattle business?"

"Because it's handy," said Brill coldly. "About halfway between here and the rail terminal at Ogalallah."

TOM RUBBED his sandy thatch irritably. "I get it," he growled. "So he kin ketch the trail herds comin' an' goin' now that the rails are takin' the cattle off the long drive up from Texas. He could even raid the Valley from there."

"Not only Hawk River Valley," said Brill. "He's in a spot to raid everything moving to and from the whole territory of Wyoming, and Montana, too. How long since he took over the Pell Ranch?" he asked Schilling.

The man looked bewildered, staring from one to the other with burned-out eyes. "You mean it's the same feller?" he asked hoarsely. "You mean you—you're lookin' fer him?"

"We're looking for him, all right," Brill's voice was flat, but emphatic. "Burgman and the other officials got away with the county funds when they skipped. Likely they've split up now, and we couldn't prove it on any one of them, but—"

"Burgman had money to buy a ranch," Tom cut in. "He musta got it somewhere."

"Yes." Brill turned opaque eyes to Schilling. "When did he buy out old man Pell?"

"Then you—maybe you kin—" The man's voice was strangled with the rush of hope breaking through him. "What?" he asked dazedly.

"When did Burgman make the deal with old man Pell?" Brill repeated.

"Oh, why—lessee—musta been only about six weeks back."

"Yes. That would be right after the funds and the sheriff disappeared. You're sure about it?"

"Yep. That's right. 'Twas along about the end of September. We'd already started throwin' our cows over the pass onto winter range. There's plenty room back there fer all of us, only Buckhorn Pass is on Pell's, on Burgman's land." The man was talking too fast, excitement beating up in him and flushing his sallow face. "We had this agreement with Pell, see. We each paid him $10 a year, an' that give us the right to use the Pass, an' Pell kep' it cleared fer himself an' the rest of us. There's rock slides, sometimes—"

"And after you got all your cows thrown over the pass, Burgman told you that agreement was no longer in force?"

"That's it. He said, come spring, he'd claim everythin' that was on his range. His range, he calls it now. Knowin' we could never round up all them critters an' drive 'em back through the Pass this time o' year. An' even if we did, there ain't hardly enough winter graze east of the Pass even fer one outfit, let alone five. Hadn't been fer that agreement with Pell, we wouldn't none of us been there in the first place. Pell wanted it that way. He got paid fer keepin' the Pass open, an' he got our help at spring an' fall roundup, an' all year round fer that matter. He didn't lose nothin' by it, an' we never thought but what the new owner would feel the same way. He'd ought to. Why, gosh-a-mighty—"

"ALL RIGHT," Brill said strongly, quieting the man's rushing words. "All right. I've got the picture. As I remember old Vince

Pell, he was not the man to sell out in a hurry and leave the country. There had to be a strong inducement, and it must have been cash. I'll bet he got a thumping big price, cash on the barrel head."

"He did. He got $17,000. He was so pleased, he give every one of his hands a $50 bonus when he laid 'em off. Six of 'em, seven with the cook. That's because Burgman was bringin' in his own crew, as tough a lot as you'd ever wanta see. Must be a full dozen of 'em. They keep comin' an' goin' all the time. Never saw a bunch with so much business off the home ranch."

"All right," Brill said again. "The cash is a dead give-away. Not even a crooked sheriff could have accumulated a chunk of cash that big. It has to be part of the missing county funds. But, of course, he had no way of knowing that you would ride all the way back here to Calypso and report it."

"If he ever finds it out," Tom said grimly, "Schilling won't last any longer than it takes Gander Burgman to grab hardware. He ain't what you'd call a patient man, even at his best."

"He's bad," Schilling said simply. "He got real tough as soon as Vince Pell was gone. 'Pears like he might have some money left, too. He offered to buy up what our fall tally books showed—at $2 a head. Nobody..." the weary, half-hopeful man straightened defiantly, "nobody took him up on the offer. Likely he will be gunnin' fer me now, but the others—the other four outfits—they'll side me. We're willin' to fight. If you could just see your way clear to come in with us, I reckon we could make up a fair size herd fer you at spring roundup."

"Providing you get your cows back," remarked Brill. "Maybe we'd better not count on it. Anyway, if I go after Burgman, it won't be ethical to collect any pay for it. I'll be doing it as part of my duty as acting sheriff of Valley County."

Schilling clenched his red hands and asked his question: "Are you goin' to do it?"

Tom opened his mouth to make one last protest, and closed it with a snap as Brill spoke.

"Yes," he said and his unfathomable eyes were totally without humor. "I may not be able to prove that Burgman got away with part of the county funds, but there's one thing I know he got away with, the official badge for the Sheriff of Valley County. And I want it."

A FINE powdered snow was being sifted over the foothills west of Buckhorn Pass, and the wind was an Arctic breath with a frozen promise. Tom Ryan shivered inside the double lining of his blanket coat, and urged his tough little cow pony up the slope after the blurred movement that was Brill and the powerful Ghost. In the early dusk, the big white Arabian did have the appearance of a ghost horse, drifting up the slope with sure-footed long strides and a minimum of noise, quite unlike the choppy scrambling of the cow pony.

"Nothin' but a ghost could enjoy an outin' like this," Tom mumbled into his turned-up collar. As acting deputy to the acting sheriff, he had insisted upon coming along, but he was not happy about it.

No one, seeing Schilling's emotion and gratitude, could doubt the man's sincerity. Nevertheless, Tom suspected skulduggery somewhere in the setup. If Bob Brill could be led into a trap and eliminated, it would suit the purposes of Burgman and the

remnants of the Hawk River gang all too well. There was no doubt but what they had recently moved cattle onto the winter range back of Buckhorn Pass. Not through the Pass from the east, but coming in from the west over trails that would be known only to night riders. Or to a lone hand like Brill, who had spent years hunting them down.

Schilling had been sent on alone with a message to the local sheriff, and instructions to keep Brill's presence a secret from all but his trusted friends. If Brill could find any of the stolen Hawk River stock back on the winter range, he would have reason enough to close down on Burgman and his crew of gunmen.

In the dusk ahead, Brill dismounted at a line shack that snuggled against the sheltered slope. Tom got down stiffly, breathing vapor puffs, and started to follow him into the darkness of the cabin, but Brill had halted at the door and stood very still, like an animal alert to danger.

Tom was reaching clumsily for his sixgun, when Brill scraped a match on the door frame and held it high in a cupped hand. The cold wind swirled down around the squatting cabin, and fine snow hissed against Tom's mouth and eyes. He shivered again, seeing the sprawled shape on the dirt floor inside. He had his gun out now, the hard cold bite of it penetrating the buckskin glove, and he was trying desperately to peer through the deceptive whirling dusk all about him. The cow pony came up and nudged him from behind and he nearly dropped the gun.

In the cabin, Brill had found the lamp and got it lighted, and with one last futile look around, Tom stepped inside. There was a close, cave-like smell permeated with cooking odors and stale tobacco smoke, and something else—the insidious, clinging smell of death.

THE MAN on the floor had been dead for several days. Part of his face was a hideous, blackened pulp where a shotgun charge had caught him at close range. Tom stood just inside the door, his gun in his hand, while Brill moved the lamp to the edge of the table and examined the corpse. Afterwards, he picked up the lamp and went over the cabin swiftly without moving anything. There was a bunk with tumbled blankets, a bench and stool, and a rough shelf with provisions. A pair of worn chaps drooped from a nail, and beside it a battered Stetson was hung jauntily. Brill nodded and put the lamp back in the center of the plank table and gazed at Tom coldly.

"The fools should have known better than to send their line riders in here," he said. "You won't need your gun right now. Maybe you can rustle up some coffee. I'll look after the horses."

"Uh-huh." Tom fumbled his gun back into the holster with stiff fingers, and looked at the corpse with a grimace. "Coffee with a corpse," he muttered. "I s'pose they fixed him up before he could spot any of the strange cows movin' onto the range from the wrong direction..."

He discovered he was talking to himself, and stepped gingerly over the body and lifted a lid of the rusty stove. Brill was already leading the horses into the lean-to at the side of the cabin. It was customary for him to look after both horses while Tom rustled the grub, because nobody else could handle the big Ghost. Intelligent, and trained to respond to the slightest gesture of Brill, the horse turned savage at the mere approach of anybody else.

Tom was prodigal with the chunks of pine he stuffed into the rickety stove. The chill had penetrated to his marrow, and his red face wore a grimace of acute pain as he contemplated the greasy, blackened coffee pot of the dead man. He emptied it on the floor and filled it with brackish water from a fat keg. Since the water had only a crust of ice, he was forced to the conclusion that his chill was not entirely due to the weather. In plain words, he was scared stiff, and he knew it.

Ex-sheriff Burgman and his gun pards had no reason to love Tom Ryan. He had attacked them without mercy in the Calypso *Gazette,* and had had no small part in driving them out of town. That kind of fighting took one kind of courage, for which he was well equipped; but this business of putting himself in the enemy's camp where the only language was gun talk, was a different matter altogether. The pen was mightier than the sword, if you happened to be holding a good pen. But bullets wrote a lot faster.

Brill had found some hay in the lean-to. There was the soft sound of munching—but nothing else. Brill moved with the silent tread of an Indian, and his comings and goings were a constant source of surprise and admiration to Tom, even in town. Out here, he would have felt a good deal easier if Brill had used a little noise to indicate what he was doing.

TOM BEGAN to feel very lonely and stifled, shut in with the dead man. The wind moaned a little, drearily, as it passed the mouth of the tin flue, and the fire in the stove sighed and took hold with more determination. With his ears keyed to the outer night, Tom was sure he caught the sound of a step, and then another and another; but they were not quite right. There was a faltering, dragging sound to the slow steps coming down the slope—not at all like Brill's swift walk.

Tom jerked his gun out and stepped to the wall close to the plank door. The steps dragged and stopped and dragged again, coming closer to the door. There was an interminable wait while the fire blazed brighter and hotter, and standing there rigidly, Tom was helplessly aware that he had neglected to close the damper.

Something hit the door a crazy wallop, and it flew back on squealing hinges and a man swayed there in the door, a long-barreled Colt aimed at Tom. The stranger looked drunk. His face was drawn, his eyes squinting and glittering in the light, his mouth hidden beneath a straggling blond mustache. He steadied himself with one hand and centered the gun on Tom's middle. "So," he said thickly, "you got Cap, too!"

Behind Tom, the coffee pot boiled over and the water hit the red hot stove with a savage hiss, and all at once Tom was mad clear through.

"You blasted idjit!" he yelled. "This feller's been dead three, four days. Anybody but a drunk could see that. Put down that gun, you're under arrest!"

"Me?" The man looked vaguely startled. "Fer what?"

"For robbery, murder, rustling, drunken prowling, and threatening the law with a gun. Put it down!"

"Listen, I..." Quite slowly, he collapsed and sprawled through the door beside the dead man.

Tom picked up the long gun and put it down on the table before he turned to rake the sizzling coffee pot off the stove and slam the damper shut. He was still mad when he went back to lift the man's feet inside so he could close the door.

Suddenly, Brill was standing beside him. "Easy," Brill said softly. "He's been hit."

"You knew he was sneakin' up on me here," Tom sputtered indignantly. "An' you just let him come!"

"I knew you could handle him. But we are about to have some more visitors. Four riders coming this way. Looking for him, no doubt."

THE MAN groaned and moved his arms trying to push himself off the floor. Brill knelt down and turned him over gently and unbuttoned the gray mackinaw. The whole left side of him was blood-soaked.

Tom said, "Those visitors you mentioned won't be comin' here to drink a cup of tea. If they were close enough to be seen, they must be almost here."

"No." Brill got to his feet. "Let's lift him onto the bunk. They're on the other side that canyon just east of here. There used to be a suspension bridge, but it looks like this hombre cut the ropes after he was across. They'll have to ride around and come up that gully from below."

"That's if they don't know any short cuts," Tom grumbled and got his arms under the man's knees. "I feel like a piece of cheese in a rat trap. No matter who comes up, they'll all try to take a bite. This jasper nearly blew a hole through me. How can you tell which side he's supposed to be on?"

"He won't matter much either way," Brill said dryly. "There's a medicine box back on that shelf..."

Tom found cotton batting and iodine among the other contents of the medical kit. Cap, if that was the name of the dead man, had come prepared for illness and injury up to a certain point. He had long since passed that point and was now decently rolled in a tarp and resting outside the crowded shack. The wounded man revived under the crude doctoring and lay there gasping with pain, his eyes riveted on Brill's face.

They fed him hot coffee, finally. He gulped it down and rasped, "Brill? Are you Texas Bob Brill?"

"That's right."

"I thought Ernie Schilling was crazy, when they told me he'd went after you. I never thought...you'd come. I'm Vince Pell."

"Young Vince," Brill said. "I knew your father. I thought you'd gone to California."

"I came back. They got my Pa. Stage company notified me. Hold-up this side of Springer's Gulch. He had money on him."

"I know. Close to $17,000. You think it was the same crew that bought him out?"

"I know it..." His voice cracked and he fell back on the bunk panting.

"Take it easy, Vince. That hole in your side isn't too bad, but you lost a lot of blood getting up to this shack. Rifle shot, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. I wanted to warn Cap Haines, after they got the two men at the other camp. They been runnin' in stock from the west. It must be—"

"Stolen? Maybe. What brands?"

"I saw some Broken W an' Box TX—"

"Both Hawk River brands. You're right, it's stolen stock. But you got here about three days too late to warn Cap. Is that all the men you had back here?"

"THAT'S ALL, except me. I slipped through the Pass at night. They got a guard there now. Won't let nobody in or out. I was lookin' fer the hosses."

"Horses?"

"That's how I knew it was them... got my Pa. He reco'nized two of the hosses the hold-up crew was ridin'.

They had the VP brand. One was a spotty mare an' the other was the big roan gelding with socks. The other passengers told it afterwards. Pa was the only one they was after. But he'd already spoke about the VP hosses before he got dragged out—"

"All right," Brill said quietly. "You've got it straight. They paid your Pa cash and then went after him—"

"I can't prove it!" young Vince groaned. "If I could jest find those hosses here, maybe Sheriff Brownlee would believe me, an'—"

"This may not be my county, but I'm a duly authorized sheriff in the Territory of Wyoming," Brill said. "If I happen to chase a bunch of rustlers across a county line, I reckon the local law will condone my acts. Especially if I save them the trouble. This is my deputy, Tom Ryan."

"Howdy," young Vince said. "You ain't gonna hold it against me fer the way I come here?"

"No harm done," Tom's voice was gruff. "You fell on your face before you could operate that cannon you was wavin' around." He looked at Brill anxiously. "Ain't it about time?"

"About." Brill stood up and looked down at the gray faced man in the bunk. "You stay put and don't get excited if you hear a racket. There's three, four gents on your trail, but they probably won't get this far."

"Thanks," young Vince gulped painfully. "I...thanks!"

"Here," Tom said. "Hang onto your cannon if it'll make you feel any easier. Not that you'll be needin' it."

The trail that led up the slope to the sheltered line shack passed through a narrow, rocky gully that was impassable during spring floods, or in dead of winter when it was half filled with treacherous snow drifts. The stream that sometimes trickled and sometimes roared through the gully, fed into the deeper canyon to the east. It was over the narrow upper end of the canyon that the stout suspension bridge had been slung, to insure free passage at all times.

TOM CROUCHED near the mouth of the gully in a nest of boulders, and held his breath when the four riders filed past, leather creaking as their horses stepped cautiously in the blackness. The powdery snow had stopped and the wind was quieted for a time as winter gathered its forces for a heavier onslaught.

One of the riders swore and muttered peevishly as his horse stumbled, and then they were past and Tom waited, clutching a round metal container and listening for Brill's challenge to come from further up the gully.

"Halt!" It came so suddenly in the quiet night, even Tom was startled. "This is the law. Throw down your guns!"

"Like hell!" a man yelled hoarsely and let loose with a six-shooter.

Under cover of the roaring racket, Tom moved hastily out into the gully, set down his metal ball, and scratched a match frantically. It broke and he tried a second that sputtered and died, and then a third that caught and touched a fat wick under his trembling hand. The wick smoldered, flared a little, and Tom scrambled back up to his boulder nest.

The racketing gunfire still echoed in the gully, but Brill had not yet returned the gunman's hasty fire.

"That won't get you anything." His quiet voice carried clearly in the momentary quiet. "Better surrender while you're able."

Tom watched the flickering wick, fearful that it would die out and

throw their timing off. Suddenly it flared and grew stronger and steadier, lighting up the gully and the four startled riders. Their horses made dancing shadows, and from Brill's vantage point, they would be sharply silhouetted.

One rider howled and spurred his horse recklessly back toward the flare, firing at it as he came. Tom already had his Winchester resting on a smooth boulder. He was much less clumsy with a rifle than he was with a hand gun. He waited until the frenzied rider was moving into the sights and squeezed the trigger.

The man was hurled backward out of the saddle and the wild-eyed horse slowed, shying back from the strange glare.

"Who the hell are you?" one of the three remaining riders yelled raggedly. "This is our range! We got a right to be here. Who do you think you're shootin' at?"

"You, Smiley, if you don't drop hardware in a hurry," Brill came back smoothly.

There was a tense silence, then Smiley croaked, "Bob Brill!"

"I've got a warrant here for you, Smiley," Brill said, almost tenderly. "And one for each of your friends. The charge is murder,"

"Naw! You couldn't have. You couldn't have a warrant this quick fer—Brill, what do you want?"

"You, Smiley. And your friends."

Smiley was edging his horse back and forth, moving toward the opposite wall of the gully in an effort to get a better aim at Brill who was above him. Tom drew a bead on the nearest of the other two men, who had their guns out but seemed willing to stay back and let Smiley do the talking.

SUDDENLY, Smiley's gun blazed, but two shots caught him and his arm was dropping even as he fired again. His companions panicked as Smiley pitched off his spooking horse. They came storming down the gully away from Brill, both firing wildly at shadows, bullets whining as they ricocheted off boulders and rock walls.

Afterwards, Tom could not remember squeezing the trigger, but he saw both men go down before they could pass the flare. One of the horses was down, too. It struggled to get up and screamed piercingly in the narrow gully.

"Tom!" Brill called through the smoke and roaring after-echo. "You there?"

"Hello!" Tom yelled back, too shrilly.

"Finish off that animal, will you?"

Tom got up on unsteady legs and tried to aim at the horse's twitching head. He sat down suddenly on a boulder and was amazed to feel himself sweating. The horse screamed again in an agonized tremolo.

"All right!" Brill called again. "I'm coming."

Dimly, Tom watched him come and shoot the horse with a .44. Then Brill was standing beside him with a strong hand gripping his shoulder. "You hit?"

"No," Tom said dully. "I guess I'm just gun dizzy. I guess I ain't—"

"You're all right!" Brill assured him with unaccustomed fervor. "Little drunk on gun smoke, is all. You might heave a little, but it'll pass. It gets you that way sometimes."

Tom was grateful, but he wished the blamed flare would go out so Brill couldn't see the sweat running down his face in freezing weather.

THE SNOW held off all night, but in the gray dawn the sky looked like a soggy, dirty blanket that sagged dangerously under its burden.

The snowy peaks of the Big Squaw Mountains were hidden now by the dirty blanket, and there was an ominous pressure in the very air of Buckhorn Pass.

Tom was surprised to find that Brill had been right about him getting his second wind. He had thought he was about finished back there in the gully. He didn't see how he could get back up to the line shack, let alone climb on a horse and ride through the black night. But he did it, and somewhere along the line he'd got a new lease on life. It was surprising what the human body could do once it was given a chance.

Brill knew about that, and he had a pretty good understanding of Tom's feelings. Once, while they breathed the horses, Brill had said casually, "All four of those gun slicks back there were vicious killers. I've wanted to meet Smiley Blase for a long time. If the others didn't have a bounty on 'em, they should have had. We gave 'em all the chance they deserved.

"Uh-huh," Tom said. "An' you still got those John Doe warrants to serve on the rest of Burgman's pals. They sure been busy since they took over the Pell ranch. I guess they thought they had the world's safest setup fer the outlaw business. It took a simple, trustin' little feller like Ernie Schilling to wreck the works. Nobody else would be fool enough to come to you askin' for help."

"That's the way it happens sometimes," Brill said musingly. "The little fellows that don't count turn out to be the most important. Never overlook the little fellows."

Tom was remembering this when he saw the riders pounding toward the eastern end of the Pass from the Pell ranch. Ex-Sheriff Burgman was a man who had discounted the little fellows, and now things had started to go haywire with his fool-proof plans.

The Pass itself was a mountain valley nearly five miles long, but the eastern entrance was protected by a natural gateway where erosion had worn a gorge through red sandstone. One man camped on the rim above the passage, was sufficient to guard it from the east—but not from the west, as Bob Brill had demonstrated.

WHILE THE night guard dozed beside a smoldering camp fire, something fell on him out of the blackness, and when he tried frantically to fight it off, a stunning blow caught him behind the ear and he went back to sleep suddenly. When he woke again, slowly, and with painful reluctance, he was alone, securely bound with rope. After what must have seemed a long, cold, cramped wait, while night dissolved into thick gray dawn, he heard sounds: Horses riding easy into the Pass, and men's voices. Somebody laughed, and in a little while, two men came toward him on foot. He recognized them at once. Little Ernie Schilling and Samp Croley, two of the small ranchers.

He raged at them, snarling threats, but they went to work with tolerant grins and paid him no mind. While Schilling saddled his horse, the chubby, good-natured Samp Croley knelt down and worked on the ropes, swearing cheerfully over the stubborn knots.

Afterwards, they led him and the horse down off the rim and out through the Pass, and told him to "git on back to headquarters an' tell Boss Burgman he don't need no guard on the Pass."

After knocking out the guard, Brill had left Tom holding down the Pass, while he rode out to meet Ernie Schilling and the other ranchers according to plan. There were nine of

them, and Schilling reported that he had sent his own hired hand in to town with Brill's message for Sheriff Brownlee. The message merely notified Brownlee that certain inhabitants of the Squaw Creek district were suspected of rustling Hawk River cows, and Brill was on his way to look into the matter. Brownlee could make what he liked of the information.

Up to now, he had shown a noticeable indifference to the complaints of the small ranchers and young Vince Pell. Up to now, the little fellows had been ignored, both by the law and the outlaws. But whatever the local law decided to do, it was obvious that the outlaws were not wasting any time. Burgman was coming in furious haste to repair what must have seemed a costly oversight.

The sullen murk made indistinct blurs of horses and riders against the snow patched land, but it was clear that Ernie Schilling's estimate of Burgman's crew had been considerably short. Even with four men eliminated, the ex-sheriff still had more than twelve riders with him.

From the rim near the guard's camp, Tom watched them spread out in echelon formation as they swept up the long sandy slope before the Pass. Near him, Brill was scanning the low hanging sky with a scowl, and Tom felt the first fat snowflake touch his face and heard the wind set up a low moaning in the gorge below.

BRILL THREW a glance back along the rim where the nine ranchers were posted around the deep U-turn made by the passage through the sandstone. It was impossible to defend the gorge from the opposite side which rose in sheer tapering spires and minarets with rotten, crumbling stone forming the base. And there was just sufficient overhang to the rim to permit a man to pass beneath on foot with the help of a heavy snowfall to blind the men on the unprotected rim above.

"Here she comes!" Tom growled as more of the lovely fat flakes came skipping and fluttering blithely on the wind.

Brill nodded, and stepped out of the stunted pine growth to call down to Burgman. The sight of the tall, white-hatted figure was enough to cause the ex-sheriff to haul his horse back on its haunches while he let loose with savage language.

"Brill! You blasted devil! Ain't you got enough to do with your hell-raisin' back in Hawk River without buttin' in here? Blast an' blister you for meddlin', triple-horned..."

His men had all come to a halt during his vicious tirade and sat their steaming horses staring up through the falling snow, their gun hands poised in various alert positions. Tom kept his rifle trained on Burgman.

And Brill shouted above the long moan of the wind: "You're covered with a rifle, Burgman. Tell your men to keep hands off their guns, or you'll get it. You know what I want."

"You won't get it!" Burgman howled back. "This is the showdown, Brill—you or me! I know you got them damned two-bit cowmen back of you there on the rim. But they won't stop me. All Hell won't stop me now!" His voice raised still higher above the wailing wind. "It goes like I said! It goes like I said!"

His beefy arm barely seemed to move, and the .45 in his hand began to blaze before he got it raised above the level of the rim. Brill dropped, and Tom squeezed the trigger and felt the jar against his shoulder as Burgman's horse jumped and staggered sideways to fall kicking. Burgman leaped clear and was racing for the Pass as his men came in shooting.

Tom pumped shots down at an

angle and saw another horse go skidding backward as the rider behind plowed into him, and horses and riders went down in a yelling, thrashing tangle. Behind him, Tom heard the guns of the ranchers open up as the men spilled into the rocky defile.

"A fool thing!" he was muttering. "A fool thing! Tryin' to rush it..." His fingers fumbled for the shells in his pocket, and he was reloading, when he saw Brill rise up ahead of him and take careful aim at something below. Another wounded horse probably. All but three of the men had disappeared into the Pass now.

Three men down and at least twelve to go. "A fool thing!" he yelled as he joined Brill who was running through the thickening snowfall. "They'll never make it through there."

BRILL SNATCHED up the coiled rope that had been used to tie the guard, and kept on running. Tom pumped his short legs to keep up with him.

"They had a plan!" Brill was shouting. "They expected the ranchers to be here. Now they've got the snow to cover them. You heard Burgman's last words: 'It goes like I said!'"

"Yeah?" Tom panted. "What—"

"Those devils brought dynamite! I'm going down. Give me your six-gun. You go on to the other end of the gorge. Watch for Burgman. Don't let him through—"

"Bob, don't!" Tom was gasping now against the smothering soft whiteness. It had grown darker and the gunfire sounded muffled and remote. "Maybe we kin—"

Brill snatched the gun out of Tom's holster and jammed it in the side pocket of his coat. "They'll slaughter those ranchers!" he said harshly. "Two or three sticks in the right places will start an avalanche. Go on, Tom. Get Burgman." He threw a hitch around a stunted pine that leaned over as if peering down into the dusk below, braced a foot and tested the pull. "Get going!" he shouted.

Tom stood for a moment, panic beating up in him as he saw the white hat disappear below the rim. If the outlaws didn't spot Brill, the ranchers would. In this blurred half-night, they wouldn't know...

He moved uncertainly from one foot to the other, blinked the soft snow out of his eyes like tears, and shifted the rifle to touch the taut rope. He couldn't make it down there, not with the rifle. He had to go on. Get Burgman. Get Burgman!

A rush of anger replaced his panic, and he started off, skirting the edge of the rim where it curved into the deep U. The shooting was ragged now, neither the men above nor below could see well enough to keep up a steady firing. There was muffled shouting down below and a riderless horse came pelting back, racing out of the gorge.

Tom leaned over, trying to spot Brill, and a shot whined past him. A rifleman was cached down there somewhere to keep the exit clear. Tom bellied down and inched his way up to the edge once more. Another shot came up and nicked the rim not a foot from his face, throwing sand that stung like miniature buckshot. But this time he had caught the flash.

The marksman was on a narrow ledge only halfway down. Tom backed up and changed his position. This time he was ready with the rifle and began laying down his shots to cover the ledge before the other man could switch his aim. Two more shots blazed at him, close enough to singe his whiskers, but he kept on methodically laying down his pattern until the gun was empty, and he saw

a blurred hump move and roll gently off the ledge. The clatter of a falling rifle came up to him, and then he saw another shape move out of the murk, catfooting around the fallen sharpshooter, and knew he had eliminated one obstacle from Brill's path.

HE WAS calmer now, and felt neither cold nor anger, but only a deadly kind of patience with the blinding snow, the slippery footing, the monotonous wind howl, and the sporadic, senseless shooting. He felt with a queer certainty that he could do nothing more for Bob Brill. Except obey his order to get Burgman.

He knew, too, what Brill had already known when he started climbing down to the bottom of the gorge. That it was hopeless to try to warn all nine ranchers and get them back off the rim before the dynamite exploded. Chances were, he might save three or four, and the rest of them would get it. Better to leave them where they were, keeping the outlaws busy, and rely on Brill to stop the dynamiters from below.

Head down, he went slogging around the big U, his feet slipping in the loose snow. The uneven shooting continued. One of the ranchers yelled at him and he kept going. He rounded the bend and started up the other side of the U and heard a sudden flurry of shooting down in the gorge. He kept going and came to the west end of the gorge where it spread out into the valley. He and Brill had left their horses down there in a stand of jack pine, and he caught sight of the Ghost near the edge of the trees. The cow pony was tied and out of sight, but the big Ghost would wait for Brill till Hell froze over, and he would never need tying. Head lifted alertly to the familiar sound of shooting, his gaze was fixed toward the gorge, as if he knew his master was there.

Tom started down a sharp incline, his boot heel caught, and he let go of the rifle as he pitched forward and rolled to the bottom. He got up without anger and looked for his hat. The white horse stared at him disdainfully and turned his steady gaze back to the depths of the gorge.

The firing had stopped and the wind sounded deeper, like a low growl in the crooked bottle neck of the gorge. He discovered he was standing on his hat, and stooped for it as a shot sounded near at hand. He stayed as he was, bent over, his hat in his hand, and saw Burgman lumbering toward him out of the gorge.

He let the hat slide out of his fingers and picked up a loose rock, making a fast underhand throw as he came up. It caught Burgman square in the chest and made him grunt, but he came on, running like an elephant, the .45 in his fist.

"Tom!" the big man panted. "Get out! Dynamite..."

TOM CLAWED up another rock and went for him. They hit head-on with a jarring thud, and Tom raked the blue jaw with a slashing fisted rock as Burgman swung back with the gun. Tom hit him again and felt the rock crack teeth, and sagged under the smashing blow on his left shoulder. Burgman grappled for his arm as he brought the gun up again, and Tom leaned with him and brought up a vicious knee. They both went down, and Burgman blew a froth of blood into Tom's face and twisted his torso, pinning down Tom's good arm.

Burgman was hurt and winded, but he slammed the gun down twice, hard enough to lay open Tom's scalp and drop him into a roaring red pit. He made the full round trip, all the way

down and back to numb awareness in a matter of seconds.

Burgman hadn't had time to finish him. Burgman was gone. Tom felt the life flowing back into his deadened limbs and remembered his rifle. Sudden hot pain knifed through his head and sickened him...

He had done it before—got on a horse and rode when he thought he couldn't even stand up. He could do it again. Get his rifle and get on his horse and go after Burgman...

He sat up suddenly, and the dizziness made the snow whirl in maddening colored circles. He hung on and gasped in cold draughts of air and snow. If Burgman had taken his horse... But he hadn't. He had gone for the Ghost, and was now approaching the regally indifferent animal from the side, taking it slow and easy so as not to alarm the high spirited brute.

The horse stood motionless, his whole attention still fixed on the gorge behind Tom. Burgman might have been miles away for all the interest he attracted. He had both hands raised now. One more step and he could vault into the saddle. The horse's ears flattened and he whirled like a flash, lifting his front hoofs as Burgman screamed and went down under the dreadful drumming...

Tom sat there with his arms braced behind him, his head thrown back to catch the cooling snowfall. The blood oozing out of his torn scalp was warm, but turned cold as it trickled down his jaw. He sat there until the sickness left him and there was only the large ache in his head to remind him of ex-Sheriff Burgman. He got up stiffly, found his hat, and forced himself to look toward the pines.

The horse was still standing there, staring toward the gorge, but he had red stockings and there was a dark blob on the snow off to his left.

THE FLASH and shattering explosion staggered Tom, and he dropped to his hands and knees and stayed there, shaking his head back and forth. He heard the slide start, and then the rumbling rush of an avalanche that drowned the sound of the wind. He dragged himself to his feet and stood there swaying, but could see nothing around the bend of the gorge. Nothing but the snow flying madly, with the smell of dust drifting through.

He turned back to the pine grove, and now the Ghost was moving his feet nervously, stretching his neck to dip the graceful head and lift it again, alarm as plain on his face as if he were human. Tom started yelling at him savagely, only half aware that he was walking toward the anxious animal.

"Get him!" he yelled. "Go get him, you damned heathen killer. He's all you care about. Go in there now an' find him. You're no good without him, you blasted fiend. You devil!" His breath was coming in sobs, and he could no more explain why he was cussing the horse than he could stop doing it. He was close now and could see the anguish in the horse's eyes.

"Get Brill!" Tom shouted at him. "Go on, get him, you—"

Suddenly, the dainty ears pricked up, and the horse whinnied softly and stood there like a bright-eyed statue. Tom looked and saw three men shambling out of the gorge, stumbling a little on unwilling legs.

"Tom!" the fourth man called. "Get your rope! Not that one!"

Tom stepped in close and lifted the coiled rope from the Ghost's saddle, and the horse merely turned and looked at him approvingly.

"Holy Mother!" Tom muttered as he ran off, "I'm crazy as a loon! We're all crazy!"

They were all still half-crazy hours

later. The usually close-mouthed, inarticulate cowmen were gathered in Ernie Schilling's log house, talking themselves hoarse and telling it over and over. How Brill went down into the gorge and not one of them took a shot at him while he knocked out the dynamiters and caught one last stick with a close-burning fuse and hurled it across the gorge into the rotting towers that ought to come down anyway.

Oh, it made fine telling on a snowy night. Even the three murdered line riders had taken on a heroic glow that softened the harsh fact of their death. In the fight at the gorge, Samp Croley had got it bad, in the lung. But he ought to pull through with his wife to nurse him. Of the other nine, all were intact except Ernie Schilling who had got a neck burn, and old Cal Watters with a nick out of one shoulder, but he had lots of nicks in him, old Cal did.

THE TALLY on the outlaws showed three prisoners for Sheriff Brill and four for Sheriff Brownlee, whose tardy arrival with a hand-picked posse had enabled him to nab the men trying to escape back through the east end of the Pass. All the rest were boothill bound. And as soon as the snow hardened, young Vince Pell could be moved on a cutter. They'd have him back at the home place, running the Pell ranch the way it ought to be run.

They sat around the big stone fireplace and drank black coffee and other potables, and smelled to high heaven of steaming wool and toasting leather and horse sweat and strong tobacco. Little Ernie Schilling sat beside his hearth and looked at them. His sallow face held stiffly above the neck bandage was flushed with heat and strong drink.

"Yessir!" he said. "This day will go down in the records. I guess now, Sheriff Brill, your deppity will have plenty news to print in his anniversary paper. Me, I'm goin' to s'cribe to that there *Gazette* even if 'tis fer another county. How 'bout it, Tom?"

Tom roused from his pleasant stupor, and a shocked grimace twisted his monkey face. He clapped a hand to the bandage on his head. "Holy Saints!" he breathed. "I plumb fergot it! The big Sixth Anniversary. Gimme a pencil an' some paper. I got to get names an facts, an—"

"Holee smoke!" somebody drawled from a corner. "We got to go all over it again? I'm 'bout wore out—"

"Where you goin', Sheriff?" Ernie Schilling asked suddenly. "You ain't walkin' out on us—"

"I don't know about the rest of you hombres," Brill said mildly, fastening his coat and picking up his gun belts. "But I have to breathe about once every so often. And there's one more thing I've got to do."

Tom got off the floor groggily and looked around the smoky room. "Where's my coat?" he queried.

"I won't need you this trip, Tom." Brill's dark eyes had a glow in them. "I'm just taking a little ride up to the Pell ranch."

"There ain't nothin' there," Schilling said doubtfully. "Sheriff Brownlee's already been all over it."

"He might have missed what I'm looking for. And I guess maybe you've forgot what it was I came after." There was wry humor now in his voice. "I was shootin' for a star, and I reckon now I'll go out and pick it up."

He opened the door and was gone soundlessly into a strange white ghost world lighted by brilliant stars, and the cold, pure breath of it swept over them as the door closed.

THE END

EDITOR'S HOLIDAY

WASHINGTON
1889
MONTANA
1889
ONE-WAY
NORTH DAKOTA
1889
OREGON
1859
IDAHO
1890
WYOMING
1890
SOUTH DAKOTA
1889
NEVADA
1864
UTAH
1896
CALIFORNIA
1850
COLORADO
1876
NEW MEXICO
1912
ARIZONA
1912
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
10
11
12

THIS MONTH, we have a new game, called *Western Line Rider*. You are the line rider. So get on your pinto, and ride from point to point on the map. At each circle, check the accuracy of the drawing and the footnote caption at the extreme right of the double spread. If you think it's okay, ride on to the next one. If you see a mistake, make a notation of your correction. If you find a question, write your answer.

Just a warning: Some of the stops are tough. There may be more than one mistake at a stop. Or there may be none at all. Correct answers are on page 75.

1 - THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT. by Mark Twain

2 - What fictional desperado sang about his Lulu gal, and who wrote about him?

3 - Navahoe Reservation. Navahoes pushed onto this barren area in an endeavor to strike oil. Failed, and starved

4 - The '49'ers

5 - Comstock Lode

6 - Rogers-and Clark, explorers

7 - Sioux heading for Canada after Custer massacre

8 - Range war

9 - Dead-man's-hand held by Wyatt Earp

10 - Buffalo Bill arrested here for shooting buffalo out of season

11 - Billy The Kid killed Pat Garrett here

12 - The Alamo, exit Davey Crockett

13 - Natchez and the Robert E. Lee racing down the river to New Orleans. Who won?

14 - Osage Reservation. Osages pushed onto this barren area to starve. Struck oil and all became millionaires. Much gnashing of teeth among politicians

15 - Boot Hill

16 - HUCKLEBERRY FINN. Who wrote him?

WRITTEN IN FLAME

By H. B. Hickey

Spittle dripped from their lips; from their backs, the blood ran from long gashes. Their screams of frenzy echoed through the night The three braves whirled, spun, cavorted.

What hope could there be for them now? The flames of the potlatch fire were leaping high, and Roaring Water's eyes carried the sentence of death

THIS WAS a potlatch, and in the great hogan of Roaring Water, chief of the largest clan in the Kwakiutl, the flames of the potlatch fire leaped ever higher. Old Roaring Water himself jumped to his feet, his face like a wrinkled demon in the red glare. *"Hear me, white ones, and know who I am: I am Roaring Water, mightiest chief of a mighty tribe. My hogans reach to the sky, my warriors are as the sands of the seas. None is richer, none burns more in the potlatch fire. I am Roaring Water. Who displeases me I crush. My voice is the thunder, my arrows are the lightning in the storm sky. I am Roaring Water."*

The chief sank back, and the center of attention was taken by three braves who flung themselves forward with incredible leaps. They whirled, they

spun, they cavorted. Spittle dripped from their lips, from their backs the blood ran in streams out of gashes inflicted by the flails of the medicine men. Their screams of frenzy rent the air. A brief moment their sweat-glistening nakedness flashed, then they fell exhausted and senseless and were dragged away.

Beside Jim Maury, the girl gasped in wide-eyed horror, and next to her, Major Gregg licked his lips, his face gone pale. This was potlatch, This was a sight they would never forget.

If they lived to remember it, Jim Maury thought, and only he of the three of them really knew how slim their chances were. Under his breath he cursed the major, the one who had brought them empty handed to a potlatch. Aloud, he spoke steadily and quickly, translating the chant of the chief.

"It calls for an answer," he said to Gregg.

"Tell him," Gregg advised, his handsome features contorting in thought, "tell him we see he is indeed mighty. Tell him we are impressed."

It was the last thing in the world Maury would have told Roaring Water, but there was no use trying to tell that to Gregg. For ten days, he had tried to explain to Gregg that the Kwakiutls were not like other Indians, that their customs and way of life were altogether different. But in the face of Gregg's arrogance, he had given up.

That arrogance was going to cost them their lives now, unless Jim Maury came up with something good. For himself, the big trapper felt little concern. Death always walked beside a man in this Pacfic Northwest country; and when he lay down at night, it was Death who whispered in the Douglas firs, who muttered in the surf. But this death, when it came, would be a bad one, and for the beautiful girl who sat beside Jim Maury, it would be even worse.

He came to his feet with a bound, almost a giant among these men. His buckskins came taut with the swell of his muscles, with the lift of his chest. His face, at thirty-five, was already set in lines like rough-hewn redwood, and betrayed nothing that was in his mind. *"Hear of a chief who is a chief! Roaring water is no chief. His fire dims the sun; all the child in the ear of my chief. His arrows are as fir needles to those of my chief. My chief is the great white father. When my chief speaks, nations tremble. Other chiefs come on their knees to the hogan of my chief. His fire dims the sun; all the water of the sea cannot quench it."*

MAURY PAUSED for breath. Beyond the leaping flames in the center, he saw the faces of the braves. He was making an impression. Even Roaring Water, stolid as always, could not conceal the betraying flicker of an eye.

This was talk a Kwakiutl could understand. This was talk for a people who fed on vanity, who burned their proudest possessions in the potlatch fire to prove their greatness. Roaring Water had been grossly insulted, but he might be convinced it was an insult he had better swallow.

Now, Maury was certain he could do the necessary convincing. All he needed was a little time. Just a little time and he could not only win their lives, but the empire that lay at stake.

Through the mass of braves, there came a man in the uniform of the British soldiery, a man who carried in his hands a fortune in furs, the pelts of sea otters. "Who is your chief?" the Briton cried. "What does your chief bring to the potlatch?"

It broke the spell. There was a shout of laughter, even Roaring Wa-

ter's face twisted into an unaccustomed smile.

"This is what the great chief in London sends!" the Britisher shouted.

His hands flung outward and upward. There was the smell of singeing fur, and then the flames leaped higher. Roaring Water watched them. When his eyes turned once more to the three Americans, they carried a sentence of death.

"I'm sorry," Maury said to the girl.

She shook her head in resignation. "It's not your fault. You warned us."

Yes, he had warned them, Maury thought. But he had also promised to bring them back safely. With Gregg, it was the failure of a mission and the failure of arrogance. But with Maury, it was more than that. He knew now that he had loved this girl since the moment he had first seen her in Captain Grady's quarters.

UP IN Vancouver, the British were astir; this Northwest had Douglas fir, tree after tree a couple of hundred feet high and as straight as plumb lines, masts enough for a thousand navies. But up from the south, the Americans came, and across the continent to the Oregon country and through it to the Sound.

It was a keg of powder that needed only the spark to set it off. And it was out of that forest-rich, tension laden country that Jim Maury came from a two month trapping to find Grady's messenger waiting for him.

"Jim," Grady had asked when Maury sat with him in his quarters, "how'd you like to go back?"

"No, thank you—" He would have added more, but Grady cut him off.

"This is important. The United States is aiming to settle the territory."

"Sure. Otherwise they wouldn't have set up this fort down here. But the British know that, Dan. They've got two wagon trains readying up in Vancouver."

"Ah. I thought that might be the way of it. But tell me, Jim, do you think they can beat us out? Your honest opinion now: Which has the better chance?"

"The side the Indians are for," Maury said bluntly.

"And which will that be?"

"The side they believe to be stronger. The Kwakiutl are no fools. They can't stand us both off forever."

"Do the British know that?"

"I hear they've sent gifts to Roaring Water."

"No! I didn't know that. Jim, you must take some people up there. Not only take them, but bring them back."

"Treaty talk?"

"Yes."

"All right. I'll take them. But as for bringing them back—"

"Can it be that tight?"

"If Roaring Water's made up his mind. Some American scalps would prove his friendship for our redcoated friends, wouldn't they?"

Grady got up and paced the room, and cursed in a steady monotone. He cursed a certain Major Gregg and he cursed the fool who had signed Gregg's orders. But Grady was only a captain, and in the end he stopped cursing and sent his messenger for Gregg.

GREGG CAME in, stockily handsome in a uniform that fit too perfectly. But it was the girl that upset Maury. He stared at this wisp of a girl, lovely in a soft, darkhaired, laughing-eyed way. Her name was Mary Ellis and she was Gregg's fiancee.

"But surely you don't mean her to go along?" Maury said, unbelieving.

"The major's orders say he may, and mine are to give him every assistance," Grady put in. "Miss Ellis

has a commission for an Indian mural, and feels some sketches would be of help."

Maury sized up the situation immediately. Grady was in a spot. A man like Gregg, with high connections at the capitol, could have him broken.

"You promised you'd do it," Grady added, getting a little desperate.

Maury grunted. He wasn't going to back out. "Are you acquainted with the situation?" Gregg looked surprised, and Maury informed him quickly of England's moves.

"I believe you are hired merely to guide and interpret," Gregg said coldly. "The diplomacy you may leave to me." He turned to Grady, disregarding the warning that flamed in Maury's eyes. "How many men will we take?"

"None. I can't spare enough to do any good if there's trouble, and less would just be a waste."

That was sound sense, and Maury wondered why Washington couldn't have let Grady handle it, instead of sending this elegant popinjay. But that was the way of it; Grady would get none of the credit if the mission succeeded, but all the grief if it failed.

"Is it really so dangerous?" Miss Ellis was asking. "Verne said these Indians were not so savage."

"We're all savage when we think we're defending our own lives and homes," Maury informed her. Then, "You'll be taking gifts for Roaring Water?"

"A trunk full," Gregg said. "And as for the danger, you must remember, we represent the government of the United States."

"Which is three thousand miles away, and doesn't exist at all as far as Roaring Water is concerned, unless you prove otherwise," Maury said sourly. He was getting fed up with this major who was mistaking vanity for pride.

"But really, Verne..." Miss Ellis began. She looked at Maury.

"Maybe death," Maury said. And then he softened, looking down at her. "Maybe just a hike up the coast and back."

ON THE second day out, Maury knew it was more than just a hike. It was toward sunset. They had cut into the forest instead of following the coast line, and after making camp, he was standing with Mary Ellis against the trunk of a giant tree, while Gregg busied himself with a shave he did not need.

"This is beautiful," Mary said, and was suddenly aware Jim Maury had not heard her.

"Keep talking," he whispered out of the side of his mouth. His eyes were on hers, but his mind was withdrawn, intent on something else.

There was a moment, then, when his ear caught the whir of a startled bird, the snap of a twig. Mary Ellis kept talking, but for him there were only the sounds of the forest. Abruptly, he turned away from her.

"I'll get some more water," he called loudly over his shoulder.

He scooped up a dipper as he passed their packs, kept walking easily toward a dip in the trees which marked the course of a small stream. Passing the first tree, he dropped the dipper and his easy manner. He looked back and grinned wolfishly at sight of the girl still standing there.

His movements now were amazingly swift for so big a man. His feet found soft beds of needles, slid over brittle twigs, as he swung around in a wide arc.

The Indian was still watching the girl when Maury came up behind him. Ten yards separated the two

men, and it was a question in Maury's mind whether to try a rush or continue sneaking up. Then a slight change in the Indian's posture, an indefinable sense of tension, made up Maury's mind for him. He had to try rushing.

He came in fast and caught the Indian at the end of his turn. The Indian was smaller, but amazingly agile and strong, and with a lightning movement, had got his hands on his knife. Maury grabbed a slippery wrist, held on grimly. A hand swiped at his eyes and he twisted his head and brought up a knee.

They went down together, the knife constantly driving at Maury's throat. He grabbed an ear, twisted savagely and felt blood on his hand. When the Indian tried to loose the ear, Maury let go and smashed his fist into the brave's chest and felt a rib crack.

Rolling, they caromed off a tree, wrestled their way through a thicket. Maury got his feet under him, and by sheer strength rose, dragging the brave with him. Teeth snapped at his wrist and he let go, then seized the knife wrist with both hands. He whirled; the brave swung up and then down and landed with a sharp crack on the back of his neck, twisted once and then lay still.

FOR THE first time since the fight had started, Maury was aware of voices. Most of the talking was Gregg's; the girl seemed half stunned by the flurry of violence which had ended so abruptly in death.

"Where did he come from?" Gregg was demanding.

"Been trailing us," Maury gasped, his breath coming dry in his throat. "I caught wind of him while Miss Ellis and I were talking. Thought I heard him earlier, but wasn't sure."

"A Kwakiutl?" Gregg asked.

"No. This one's from up Vancouver way. Looks like the British were expecting us."

"Well..." Gregg seemed undecided, his assurance ruffled. "Too bad you had to kill him; he might have given us some information."

Maury held back the angry retort on the tip of his tongue. "I'd better bury him," he said. "Otherwise, we'll have company tonight."

He worked quickly, then went down to the stream and washed the dried blood from his hands. When he came back, Gregg was not in sight, but a light gleamed from his tent. Mary Ellis was waiting by the same tree where they had been speaking previously.

"I'm sorry that had to happen," Maury said.

"You couldn't help it." She paused "It's amazing—"

"What?"

"That you knew he was there. I hadn't heard a thing."

"You didn't know what to listen for. Like I wouldn't know how to paint that sunset, or a tree."

"I wonder. Underneath you're more gentle than you seem."

"Not too gentle," Maury said gruffly, "to drag you back to the fort if I had my way."

She seemed to be thinking some secret thought. "I don't want to go back. It isn't just the mural, you see. Back in Washington, there's a glitter that hides things. I thought if I came out here, I might learn..."

Her voice trailed off, leaving Maury wondering what it was she wanted to learn. Her eyes lingered for a moment on his, then she flushed and looked away. Head tilted back, she ran her gaze up the height of the trees to where they impaled purple tinged clouds.

"Things here run to big scale,"

Maury told her as he watched her.

She nodded, taking in his own size, and he had his turn to flush. "I didn't mean men. They don't go by size."

"Maybe," she murmured. "They have their own scale too, though." She turned, and in doing so, lost her balance. Maury grabbed her arm and found, to his surprise, that she was trembling.

"I suppose it was the fight," she explained. "For a moment, I thought that knife was going to reach your throat."

"Even if it had," Maury said, "Gregg would have got him with his pistol. And from here, he could still get you both back to the fort."

His matter-of-fact tone brought sparks of anger to her eyes, but the anger subsided as quickly as it flared. "I imagine he could," she said, almost defiantly. It was as though she felt a need to defend something. "Under his pomposity, Verne has some good qualities."

Maury shrugged. "For pomposity, he'll soon meet his match. A Kwakiutl feels big by making everyone else feel small. He'll even burn down his house to prove he's so weathy he doesn't give a hang."

"You're joking."

"I wish I were. And I wish I knew what gifts Gregg was bringing to Roaring Water."

ON THE tenth day, they came through the forest and out onto the coast again, and on the eleventh day they were in the village. For three days they had been under surveillance, but always at a healthy distance, and Maury had not even mentioned the fact.

"The dogs!" Mary gasped. A pack of them were roaring out of the village to meet the strangers.

"Just pay no attention," Maury told her. "They won't bite."

After the dogs came the children, then the women shooing them back. When the women had faded back, the braves appeared, ranging themselves in silent watchfulness, and only then did Roaring Water make his appearance.

Only the wrinkles on his face betrayed Roaring Water's age. His step was firm, his carriage erect. Obsidian eyes fixed for a while on the three whites, remained unblinking even after a palm was raised in the gesture of peace.

"Why do you come?" he said bluntly.

"We come to speak friendship," Maury told him.

The chief's mouth turned down. "Whom we cannot defeat, we seek as friends." He glared at Maury. "Of you I know. Some day, your scalp will hang at my belt; your head I will put in one of your own traps, as a warning to others who kill our game."

Maury ignored the threat. "We come to speak friendship," he repeated. "From our great chief we come, bearing gifts to Roaring Water."

"Your chief is as nothing," Roaring Water spat. Yet, the mention of gifts had reached him; it remained only to phrase his next words properly. "I will show you what a chief is," he said. "Tonight, we will have potlatch."

After that, there was little time Maury and the others had alone. "So far, so good," Maury told Gregg at the first opportunity.

But when evening came and the fire was lit in the center of the chief's hogan, Maury was not so certain. The braves were in war paint, gourds of oil stood near the fire.

"He's really laying it on thick," was Maury's comment. He could not conceal a worried frown, and it was instantly echoed by Gregg.

"What does that mean?"

"It means we'd better copper his bet, outdo him, or it might be too bad."

One of the braves was stepping forward, and they stopped talking to listen. He was a big man, with a stentorian voice that filled the hogan and seemed to make the smoke of the fire vibrate.

"This is the Duck tribe, this is the tribe of Roaring Water! No other tribe has such braves, no other tribe has our wealth. What falls from our mouths would make a feast for others. Even the great dugouts mean nothing to us."

AS THOUGH the words were a signal, six braves came through the ranks bearing a large dugout canoe. With a careless gesture, they tossed it onto the already roaring fire. Sparks shot upward, then a fresh burst of flame as the wood caught hold.

"See!" shouted the spokesman. *"But even this is nothing. With our precious oil we feed the roaring potlatch fire!"*

With his own hands, he lifted a gourd and emptied it, threw it aside and took another. Three in all he emptied into the fire, and when he was finished the flames licked at the roof.

"What other chief, what other tribe can do this?" Then he returned to his place beside Roaring Water.

Maury got to his feet. *"We bring gifts to Roaring Water! Our great chief sends us, bringing gifts to prove his greatness."*

He turned to the large box they had packed on the trip, that now lay beside them. He looked at Gregg, and Gregg got up and produced a key and turned it in the lock.

With a heave, Maury had the box on his shoulder and was carrying it across the floor to Roaring Water. A few steps before the chief, he paused and dropped the box. Inscrutable eyes rested on him. Then Roaring Water nodded. Maury flung open the lid.

Dismay brought a groan to his lips. Most of the weight had been the box itself. The contents were pitifully meager. Costly perhaps, but few in number. A necklace of gold, finely wrought, but Roaring Water would never appreciate the workmanship. A great silver tray, but Roaring Water would prefer copper. A worth less musket would have made the chief's eyes glisten; instead, there was a brace of pistols with silver inlay.

One by one, Maury produced the gifts, and when they had all been shown, he returned them to the box. Roaring Water was staring at him when he straightened, and now the black eyes glinted with anger.

"These are the playthings of children!" Roaring Water snapped. *"These are to me as a handful of earth!"*

His head jerked; the brave beside him strode forward. Gifts and box alike hurtled into the flames. Maury stared at the fire a second and then returned to his own place.

"Guess he didn't like your gifts much," he said with grim humor to the open-mouthed Gregg. "As a matter of fact, he's grossly insulted at the meanness of your offering."

Gregg was looking straight ahead, his face white and strained, the arrogance gone. "What is he going to do?"

"He'll make a speech," Maury said as Roaring Water came toward them. "After that... Well, I'd rather not say..."

NOW, THE Englishman in uniform sat beside Roaring Water. The Englishman had a face like stone; Maury watched it and saw no

hope for mercy there. With the death of the three Americans, Roaring Water would bind himself to the British; tighter than a treaty it would bind Roaring Water. In the Englishman's place, Maury could have been as unmoving, as cold.

A half dozen braves were already rising to their feet at their chief's signal. At a nod of his head, another six rose. All of them dangled tomahawks in their hands. Fanning themselves out in an arc, they proceeded forward, but very slowly. There was nowhere the three victims could run.

"They wouldn't dare..." Gregg gasped.

No use answering that. Maury sat very still, his mind racing. Beside him, the girl stirred, and he looked down at her. She was white with fear.

"I'm sorry," Maury said softly.

"It's not your fault." She put her small hand over his.

And yet, he thought, if it was anyone's fault, it was his. He alone had known what might face them, and even if Gregg were an arrogant fool, he should have taken precautions to see that Gregg's arrogance did not land them in such a situation.

This would mean not only his life, but Gregg's and Mary's as well. And it would mean trouble for Captain Grady. He had given Grady his promise, and now the promise would be broken. Maury felt that keenly.

But most of all, he felt the knowledge that Mary would die, too. Her hand was still on his, so small and soft and yet so steady. It was something for him to wonder at.

"I suppose there's nothing for us to do?" she asked resignedly.

"There is something," Jim Maury said. "Can you smile? You, too, Gregg. Not that sickly smile! Smile like you meant it."

Then he stepped forward to meet the advancing braves. He held up a palm, signifying his wish to speak, and Roaring Water gave the word for his men to pause.

Maury's hands lifted to the flap of the buckskin jacket he wore. Two sharp tugs tore it from his shoulders. He stood bare to the waist, and flexed the huge biceps of his arms, let them see the swell of his chest as he sucked in a deep breath.

"What is the wealth of Roaring Water? What is the wealth of the British? They are nothing! Dugouts are wood; oil and furs are the remains of dead animals. In battle, only men are wealth! In battle, you will see the wealth of my chief!"

Deliberately, Jim Maury spat into the potlatch fire. His lips curled in a contemptuous sneer. *"Where are men of the Kwakiutl to match the men my chief will send?"*

The challenge was answered as fast as it was hurled. From Roaring Water's left came the brave with the stentorian voice. Big, nearly as big as Maury himself, the brave moved with the speed and power of a charging bull.

There was no jockeying for position. This was going to be fast and final. The brave came in low and reared up. Maury straightarmed him. Off balance, the brave kicked expertly. But Maury had been up against Indians before.

He caught the kick on his thigh, deflected it sideways so that the brave was spun around with his back to him. Maury's huge hands clamped around the brave's throat while his knee jammed into the small of the Indian's back, holding him helpless.

IT WAS over quickly. The brave went limp and Maury dropped one hand to his crotch while retaining the other at the throat. With a heave, he lifted the limp body and flung it away from him. More by chance than by design, it rolled toward Roaring Water, but Maury was quick to seize

the opportunity it gave him. His voice rose in Kwakiutl singsong: *"Such are the men of my chief. Such is the wealth of my chief. Other braves are as children; his fear no man. When my chief speaks, his men go to certain death with smiles on their faces; such is the power of my chief. This is the message of my chief. This is what he sends to the potlatch."*

Then Jim Maury walked with slow but firm step toward the great fire.

It took a few seconds for them to realize what his words had signified, what his purpose was. Then their traditional stoicism broke. Many things they had seen at potlatch, many boasts had been made, but never before had they seen a man walk of his own accord or at the command of his chief into the flames.

Even Roaring Water lost his inscrutability. Half rising, he leaned forward, his eyes widening. He had expected Maury to put up a fight, perhaps even take one or two braves with him to his death. From a man like Jim Maury, old Roaring Water expected such things.

But that Maury would walk meekly to his death in fire at the command of a chief three thousand miles away, was something to make Roaring Water ponder. And that Maury meant to go ahead, was beyond question. Already he had approached the flames, and his step had not slowed. Another step and he would feel live coals beneath his feet.

"Stop!" It was the voice of Roaring Water.

He had pondered this and pondered it quickly. This was a gift he could not afford to accept. For if he accepted it, then the gauntlet was down. And a chief who sent peltries was one thing, but a chief who sent living men was another, and not to be taken lightly.

"Tell your chief," Roaring Water said, *"that his gift is too great for me to accept. My own gift shall be to return his to him unharmed. And tell your chief that Roaring Water desires only his friendship, desires only to live in peace and brotherhood with him. This is the message of Roaring Water to your mighty chief."*

IT HAD taken eleven days to go, and it was ten days to return. Grady had worn himself to a frazzle pacing his quarters, and nothing would do but that he have the whole story and at once. But Gregg dismissed it with a trace of his old arrogance, and it fell to Mary to tell it. She told it with the same tears at the end that she had wept when Maury had come back to her side.

Grady shook his head in admiration. "So he bluffed old Roaring Water down? Ah, that was clever."

"But was it a bluff? Or would he have gone through with it?"

"If we knew that," Grady grinned, "we'd know more than Roaring Water did." Then, because he could see a thing or two: "Why not ask Jim Maury?"

"I will," said Mary.

She asked the question on the day she and Gregg left, asked it looking up into Maury's face, with her hand on his arm.

For reply, Maury shrugged. "As long as it never got that far," he said.

"And if it had?" she pressed.

He shrugged again, this time with a trace of embarrassment. "It doesn't matter much how you die," he said. "And it might have saved you and Gregg."

"I see. I'm glad you answered that."

"Why?"

"I asked Verne whether he'd have let you go through with it."

"Well?"

"And he said, if it would save us, why not?"

"Does that make a difference to you?"

"A great difference, Jim."

He kissed her then, and when he let her go, her eyes were shining with happiness. "I had to know," she whispered.

"I'm glad you did."

"Jim, I've got to go back to clear up that work I undertook. It will take me a year to return. Can you wait that long?"

"That long, but not much longer. It'll take me a year to build the kind of house we'll want."

Then he kissed her again, a kiss that would have to hold them for the year.

THE END

CURSE OF THE FRONTIER

★ By A. W. O. LOWRY ★

WHEN MANY wild animals still roamed the open prairies, hydrophobia was a great curse to the settlers and travelers there. A mad wolf, being swift and vicious in attack, could do a great deal of damage to men and animals. Foxes likewise became rabid. Even the buffalo sometimes went mad.

Most feared carrier of the deadly disease was the skunk. It is a small, quiet animal, which travels at night. A rabid skunk could bite a man encamped for the night under the stars with no warning of its presence until the fearful damage had been done.

In those days, there was no remedy for hydrophobia, although men tried to cure it with madstones. A madstone was a mass of hair which an animal had licked from its own back and swallowed. The indigestible ball of hair was retrieved from the stomach of a slaughtered animal, and carried by many people as a talisman. In case of a bite by a rabid creature, the madstone was worked about the wound, in the hope that it would absorb the poison.

FIGHTING BULL

★ By L. BLACKWELL ★

MUCH HAS been said about the Texas longhorn. This now vanished specie of cattle, once so prominent a part of American history, was certainly not a noble animal—at least in appearance. However, his hardiness and toughness was enough to give him a romantic reputation. The really tough brand of cattle that inhabited Texas was known as the "mustang", or wild cattle.

Such cattle were black, small, wiry, and with forward-pointing horns. They were as cruel and as vicious as they looked. They were descendants of the first Spanish cattle who had been brought over to the new world and then allowed to escape, run wild and multiply into large numbers. These cattle were extremely dangerous.

It was reputed that Texas cattlemen were afraid to be on the east side of the Little Brazos River at night, because the wild cattle, the mustangs, came to drink at that time and they would attack man or beast without hesitation or provocation. The buffalo was tame compared with these wild cattle.

The best measure of their ferocity, however, can be gleaned from the famous incident in which an American Army was practically routed by a single mustang bull. During the Mexican War, General Zachary Taylor was proceeding southward at night with a force of men. One of the soldiers spotted a lone bull watching the passing column. In a burst of enthusiasm, or boredom, he fired at the animal, expecting to see it take to its heels in mad flight. To his surprise, the black bull lowered its horns, and with lightning-like rapidity, tore across the plains right into the column of marching men.

Arms and men, equipment and guns flew everywhere. It was a miracle that the men managed to avoid being killed. After sending the once rigid military force into chaos, the bull nonchalantly dashed away into the darkness. The soldiers had been unable to fire on the animal for fear of hitting one another.

The cursing officers finally managed to restore order, but it was a long time before any man fired again for amusement at any of the numerous wild cattle to be seen on the way to Mexico!

THE DOG SOLDIER BAND

★ By E. BRUCE YACHES ★

IN THE Cheyenne tribe, as with many other Indians, warfare was the highest aim of life. To conduct himself in battle according to the best tradition of his people, was the ideal of young Indian manhood. The warrior societies, or fraternities of fighting men, had the greatest prestige. During the sixties and seventies, when war with the whites was at its fiercest, the Dog Soldier band consisted of the best and most daring of Cheyenne fighters. There were other warrior societies, the Coyote Warriors, the Flint Warriors, the Fox Warriors, and so on, but the Dog Soldier band contained the pick of the tribe.

In the war of 1865 to 1868, the Dog Soldiers, led by Tall Bull, became so famous, that whites often referred to the entire Cheyenne tribe by that term. After the campaign of 1868, many of the Cheyennes went back to the reservation and attempted to lead peaceful lives. But the Dog Soldiers remained hostile and defiant. They would not forget their righteous grievances, nor would they accept the white man's peace.

Consequently, the spring of 1869 found the Dog Soldier band harassing the frontier with a vengeance. For a time, they made a raid somewhere almost every day. They captured dozens of heads of horses and mules, and scores of citizens were killed in the attacks.

Several companies of soldiers, under General Carr, were given the task of running down and punishing the Dog Soldiers. This they were able to do, but not easily.

The Cheyennes were warned, picked up their camp bag and baggage, women, children and old people, and soon showed their heels to the pursuing cavalry. They got so far ahead that they evidently considered themselves safe and stopped to camp for a day at Summit Springs, near the Platte River. Here, Carr's scouts discovered them, and the white soldiers staged a surprise attack on the Indian village which completely demoralized the Cheyennes. In a brief, fierce battle, many of the Indians were captured or killed, and all of their tepees and supplies were destroyed. The leader of the Dog Soldiers, Tall Bull, attempted to escape with a few other warriors and their wives and children, but they were cornered in a ravine, and Tall Bull and most of the others were killed.

Answers To Editor's Holliday, page 63:

(1) Oops! Trouble right off the bat. THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT was a great western yarn, but it was written by Brett Harte, not Mark Twain. If you caught this one, take ten points.

(2) If you're up on your great western authors, this one was a cinch. The Cisco Kid sang about his Lulu gal in THE CABALLERO'S WAY, by O. Henry. Take five if you hit it. If you missed, you don't lose much.

(3) No mistake here. Just a plain shame. Take five.

(4) Just wave your hat here and ride on. The '49'ers didn't need any help. They were tough. They didn't need a Ford V-8 or a Cadillac to make California.

(5) Ride on fast. Stop, and you'll get in trouble here. Too much money laying around.

(6) If you've got some bunion plasters in your saddle bags, these boys would appreciate the loan of same.

(7) Don't get too close to these characters. They're tough. They'll mow you down. Ask Custer.

(8) More trouble! Great smokes! Ain't they no peaceable citizens in this country?

(9) Here's a double that pays off plenty if you were on the alert and had your duke near your shootin' iron. First, the famous dead-man's-hand wasn't aces and sixes. It was aces and eights. Also, Wyatt Earp had nothing to do with it. That was the hand Wild Bill Hickok held when he was shot in the back. Take twenty for both; ten if you caught either mistake.

(10) No, no! There wasn't any season on buffalo except open season. That's why they disappeared so fast. An easy one. Take five.

(11) Just backwards. It was Pat Garrett who ventilated Billy. And was the Kid surprised! He'd have bet dough that there wasn't a gun slinger in the West who could do it. Take ten.

(12) Tip your hat to a great fighter and one of the greatest Westerners—Davey Crockett. He laughed in Santa Anna's face.

(13) Double header here that pays plenty. Mistake: The Natchez and Robert E. Lee raced up the river from New Orleans—not down the river. Answer to question: The boats left New Orleans on June 8, 1870. The R. E. Lee arrived at St. Louis 6 hours and 36 minutes ahead of the Natchez. Take 30 points—15 and 15.

(14) Take ten points here just for laughs. And it's a spot to laugh plenty. When it was discovered that the Osages, sitting on their miserable, barren reservation, were parked over one of the biggest oil pools in the world, the politicians of the time went nuts at having missed the pay-off. All the Indians got rich and bought limousines. A fine account of this incident in the history of Oklahoma can be found in Edna Ferber's fine novel, Cimarron.

(15) Keep riding. Any stop here might be permanent.

(16) Mark Twain, of course. Five points here makes your even hundred and a perfect score.

HORSE-THIEF

By William Hopson

It can sure make a difference which of the Allison twins you get to side you. But when they both team up. . . Well, ask Brad Morden the results

THEY HAD started loading cattle aboard the three small paddlewheel steamers at daylight that morning. Two of the boats had already disappeared down the river toward the Gulf, and now the third one lay moored tight to the big river-front wharf, gruntingly content like a sleepy hog in a cool mud wallow. A short distance out, Jay Allison helped the five other riders hold the angry, bawling steers, while Negro dock hands hurriedly threw the portable loading chutes up over the broad ramp leading into the steamer's hold. It was a tough job, getting these wild cattle aboard; tougher than it had been to comb them out of the oak forrests where the air was dank and the moss hung from limbs along the streams.

Jay wiped at the sweat on his face, and then spun his horse to go after a steer that had tried to break out. Although it was only ten o'clock, he was drenched with sweat and his horse was lathered and wet. That was what the humidity could do. This is a darned awful way to make a living, he was thinking, and maybe Joe was right when he said I was crazy not to come with him.

From the distance, a Negro crawled up on the chutes and waved his old hat. Perk Holeman called out, "Okay, boys. Let's crowd 'em!"

They started the crowd, and as the bawling animals bunched closer against the wide wings of the chute, the dust rose and became a mass of plunging horses and steers and cursing riders. The loud *whack* of quirt and rope against chapped legs and red rumps, mingled with the *"hoh-hoh-hoh's"* of the shouting riders. A big steer braced himself at the mouth of the chute and refused to budge further. The riders spun and whirled to fight the remaining herd from breaking, and Jay knew they were in for trouble. But one of the Negro dock hands drove a long pole with a sharp point in through the fence and punched the steer in the flank. It let out a bawl and lunged through into the already well filled hold, and presently the others followed.

"That boy," Jay grinned at Perk, the foreman, anent the Negro dock hand, "is the best cow puncher here."

Perk wiped his face with a sleeve. "Well, I guess we got 'em. I don't know what you boys air goin' to do, but I'm headin' straight fer Moseley's to git myself the biggest mug of cold beer he's got in the house. Lordy, but I'm dry!"

They trotted over to where, two hundred yards away, Moseley's saloon squatted on a corner of the dank street, a crude building with log walls of hand cut oak. In the rear was another room with a small bar, where the Negroes drank.

They swung down and clanked into the coolness and Moseley came over, a big easy-going man in a dirty white

MASQUERADE

She was furious, and Jay stopped her anger in the only way he knew. He grabbed her and kissed her, and the mail she was holding fluttered down.

apron. "Don't say it", he chuckled. "This weather is too hot to drink whiskey. It's beer weather from the word go. You boys get 'em loaded all right?"

Jay nodded. "They'll be in the gulf by tomorrow morning and ready for transfer to outgoing vessels. That's sure one job I wouldn't want."

Moseley had been busy drawing mugs of foaming beer. He put one in front of Jay and said, "Say, that reminds me, Jay. The station agent was down here a few minutes ago looking fer you. Got a telegram fer you. I told him he'd better leave it here, said if he went traipsin' out there around them steers on foot, they'd likely run him down and make mince meat outa him." He reached into the till and brought the wire out. "Here you are."

Jay said, "Thanks," and took the yellow paper. He moved on a bit further along the bar and heard Perk's significant chuckle. "One of them billie doo's from some skirt, heh?"

Jay opened the missive and read the agent's handwriting: *Jay Allison, White Oak Ranch, Mud Bank, Texas. It is important that you come here at once concerning a matter I cannot mention. Tell no one about this and contact, James Swinnerton, Ashbury, Texas.*

Jay put the crumpled paper in a shirt pocket and picked up his drink of beer. Ashbury. That would have to do with Joe, his twin brother, since Joe's last letter to him had been from there. Jay thought of the terrible humidity here, of the malaria and scurvey and pellegra, and wished now that he had gone earlier in the year when Joe had begged him to. They'd never been separated very much in their childhood, and they were now twenty-five, when men often preferred to keep more to themselves, where blood didn't count so much as it once had.

"Anything up?" Perk asked.

"Nothing particular," Jay said carelessly. "Folks want me to come home for a family reunion of all the relatives. I can just about make it if I get the evening train out." He put down the beer. "Well, boys, I've got to go hunt up the old man and get my time, and then go out to the ranch and pack. I'd better get going. I'll see you before I go."

HE FOUND Hanson, the owner, down in the town's only hotel, settling up with a dark-eyed, dark-faced Spaniard who paid off in gold. Jay didn't have to be told where those cattle were going. Beef for fighters in another of the many insurrections breaking in Cuba or Mexico or one of the Central American countries. They were hungry down there, they were resentful against Spanish rule, and Cubans were trying to do something about it.

"So you're pulling out?" the owner said. "Hate to see you go, Jay, but a man owes a duty to his family. Anytime you're back this way and looking for a job, come out and see me."

Jay thanked him and left. He hired a rig at the livery and drove out to the ranch, after unsaddling and leaving his horse for the others to take home. He packed his warbag with his few belongings and drove back to town, his sun burned face wearing a deep frown.

He was wondering about Joe, his twin brother. Joe was a little wild and a devil with the girls, and he must have gotten into trouble. He was probably in jail, or he'd have sent the wire himself. Jay let the matter ride and drove on in. He paid for the rent of the rig, put his saddle gear in a gunny sack, and carried it over to the small station. It took nearly half an hour to get his ticket fixed up and, afterward, he went back across the

street to have a final drink with the boys.

They had several, and by the time the four coach train puffed in, led by the bell-stack locomotive, Jay's frown had disappeared. He was in good humor. He shook hands all around and when the mustached conductor yelled for him and the three other passengers to "Boooorrrrrd", he told the men so-long and swung up the steps with his duffel.

The train got jerkily under way, pushing south a ways before swinging west, and Jay Allison relaxed in the seat and smoked. He changed at midnight, ate, waited an hour for the next one, and slept all the way through on it, cramped in the narrow seat. Just before sundown the following day, he descended stiffly and looked over the town of Ashbury. The station was about two hundred yards from the collection of buildings, some of them two-story, and on the back of one of them had been painted in huge letters, Ford Hotel.

He was tired, begrimed, hungry, and his mouth had the bitter taste of irregular meals, no exercise, and little sleep for forty-eight hours. A Negro of uncertain age drove him down to the hotel and gratefully accepted the fifty cents with a doff of his hat. Jay went in to register.

The middle-aged man at the desk said casually, "Ain't seen you around in quite a while, Joe. Been away, eh?"

Jay was in the act of putting his name on the paper. He thought, Mister, you're not the first person who couldn't tell me and my brother apart. Not even the school teachers could.

But there was something about this he didn't like, and an inherent caution made him pause with the pen in hand. "Yeah, ain't been around for awhile." Joe always said *ain't*, and jeered at him good naturedly because of his better usage of words.

The pen scratched. Joe Allison, Ashbury, Texas.

"Giving you the same old room," the clerk said. "You know where it is. There's somebody upstairs, too," and the clerk grinned and winked significantly.

"Thanks," Jay told him.

HE TOOK the key, which luckily had the number of the room on it. So many cowtown hotels used keys that fit every lock, and there wasn't much use in numbering the leather tags. The Ford was progressing with the times. He took his duffel bags, went up the stairs and down a dim hallway, the carpeting worn and filled with holes from the marks of a thousand bootheels and spurs. He shifted the bags, and the gunnysack containing his saddle and rifle and other gear slipped. It hit the floor with a crash.

He put down the other bag with a muttered imprecation, and unlocked the door. As it swung open, he saw a head of flaming red hair and blue eyes; saw the startled look on her lovely face as she came out.

"Joe!" she sighed. "Oh, Joe, darli. g!"

He heard the rustle of her skirts, and then she was in his arms. She put both of hers around his neck and held hi tightly and lifted up her face to be kissed.

It had been long time since Jay had kissed a woman. He'd had his share of dancehall girls and others on occasional payday sprees, but it had been his brother who was the devil with every pretty woman he met; handsome, dashing, bold Joe Allison.

Some inner voice shot a warning through him. You'd better be careful, fellow. There's something about this set-up that doesn't fit into place. Watch your step. He wanted to tell her that he wasn't Joe, but Joe's twin brother, but he had to go slow until

he found out what this was all about. He bent down and kissed her, feeling like a fool, and knowing how awkward he was.

He had seen Joe kiss girls at dances. Joe took them in his arms and moved his head and gently whimpered to let them know that this particular kiss was out of this world. He kissed them along the cheeks and on their hair and then worked back down to their lips again and held them hungrily.

She stepped back from him, her face flushed. "Well!" she exclaimed in pretended indignation. "I must say that a month's absence hasn't made you grow any fonder. Or were there too many other girls down home?"

"It's just that I'm tired," he said "I've been travelling." So Joe had supposedly been home, and the letters Jay received from his mother each week had made no mention of that particular fact.

"You could at least have written," she said.

He pretended a careless shrug. "You know how it is," and he wondered what her name was, "being with the folks."

"How are they?"

He lifted his duffel bags and carried them in, anything to avoid her eager eyes. "Same as usual," he answered her question. "Dad lost a few head in the waterholes; bogged down in the mud."

"So that's why you're two weeks late?"

He nodded. He was on surer ground now. "I had to stay over and give the boys a hand."

"Dad's in town." She stood in the doorway now while he removed his hat and the loose tie at his throat. It was too hot to wear a coat. "He's still not reconciled to our getting married, but he'll just have to like it. We'll be going out to the ranch in the morning. Now, you hurry up and get cleaned up and come on down and have supper with us."

"All right," he said. "But I've got to take a bath first. After two days of dust and cinders, I'm as dirty as a hog."

"I know, darling. But hurry it up. It's b e e n a whole month since I've seen you."

She went out and closed the door behind her, and Jay Allison sat down on the edge of the bed, his mind in a whirl.

This, he thought, is one hell of a mess, and I wish I knew what it was all about.

CHAPTER II

HE STRIPPED off hat and shirt, and hurriedly washed in a basin of cold water. There was no time to get hot water from below; he lathered hard and winced at the scratch of the razor, but there was nothing to do but scrape the whiskers off. He put on a clean shirt, cautiously opened the door and peered into the hallway. It was empty, and Jay hurriedly went toward the back door.

A flight of steps led down to the alley, and he made it unseen. Further up, he saw a big pile of whiskey bottles and cans and, n e a r b y, a big double outhouse. That would mean the back of a saloon. He made his way along the alley and came up to a back door. He opened it cautiously, then walked in casually as though he were an old customer.

He knew Joe. Joe liked to drink, and if he'd been in Ashbury very long, he'd be known in the saloons.

It was the time of night when most men were home for supper, and there were few customers in the place. For this, Jay was grateful. He strolled over to the bar and the bartender grinned at sight of him.

"Howdy, Joe," he greeted, extending a hand. "Say, where you been keepin' yourself lately? Ain't seen you in a month of Sundays."

"Been down home," Jay said briefly. "Visiting the folks. How's things been going?"

"All right, I reckon. A few fights, an' Ted Jarvis shot old man Hannegan and had to light out. I saw Ellen on the streets a little while ago with her ma and pa. You going back ridin' for Randall?"

So her name was Ellen Randall? That helped a lot. Jay shrugged. "Quien sabe? A man has to make a living somehow. Seen Jim around?"

"Jim who?"

Maybe, Jay thought, a little tight inside, I've made a mistake. But I've got to find him and learn a few things about this setup before I brace the Randalls at supper.

"Swinnerton," he said.

"Oh. Jim. Sure, he's around someplace. Tried his office?" The bartender went to the end of the bar fronting the street wall and peered out. He turned. "I expect you'll find him in his office. I see the front door open. But then, he never closes it anyhow when he leaves." He came back and put a glass on the bar, reaching for a bottle behind him.

"Same thing?" he asked, and poured without waiting for an answer. It was straight rye, one hundred proof, without a chaser.

"Same thing," Jay nodded. It looked as though he was going to have a hard time filling his brother's shoes until he got this mess straightened out. Joe was a hard drinker, while Jay hated the stuff.

But he was tired from the long ride, and the fiery liquor was welcome. He downed it at a gulp, and slid a quarter across the bar. The barkeep shook his head. "On the house to a good customer, Joe."

"Thanks. I'll run over now and try to see Jim."

HE CALLED, "See you later," and went out, still a little tight in the midriff at the thought of the ordeal of eating supper with people he had never set eyes on before. Ellen Randall. He must not neglect to ask this Swinnerton what were the names of Mr. and Mrs. Randall. He had to be careful of every step, for there was something about this whole setup he didn't like. He knew something was very much wrong. Joe was either dead, in jail, or in hiding. It couldn't be anything else. He had wanted to find out as much as possible from the bartender, which was why he had asked him how things had been going.

He crossed the street and made his way along the boardwalk to the open door of a small one story building with two windows on the front wall, one on either side of the open door. The words *James Swinnerton, Attorney-At-Law* were on the windows.

Jay Allison went in. The place was deserted except for the man who sat back of the desk going over some papers. He was in his thirties, blond, well built and shaven. He wore good clothes and a pair of cowman's boots. He said, "In a minute," and followed through on a sheet of paper, making notes on a pad with a pencil. Then he looked up.

The pencil dropped from his hand. He rose slowly. "My god!" was all he said for the moment.

He walked over and shook hands, then stepped back and cocked his head to one side while his keen eyes played over Jay's face and figure.

"It's impossible. It just can't be! And yet I know it's the truth. You're Jay Allison, aren't you?"

Jay nodded, waiting. "Where's Joe?" he asked finally.

Swinnerton got up and closed the

front door. He nodded toward a chair and went back to his desk.

"I haven't got much time," Jay said impatiently. "I got in on the train just a little while ago. Took a room at the Ford, number twenty-three upstairs, and the next thing I knew a red haired girl grabbed me and started hugging me."

The lawyer laughed. "That's Ellen Randall. She and Joe are engaged to be married."

"I know," grunted Jay. "She told me that much. I'm supposed to go over and eat supper with them as soon as I finish bathing and shaving. So I haven't got much time. I want to know their names, what I'm supposed to do, where Joe is and what's up. Tell it in as few words as possible, and give me any information as to what this mess is all about. Where's Joe, and where do you fit in?"

Swinnerton smiled and leaned back in his chair. "I'll brief the case for you as quickly as possible. Last week, Joe got himself badly shot up. We've got him hid out. It was he who got me to send that telegram at another station down the line, because nobody around here except me knows he has a twin brother."

"What's your part of the deal?" Jay shot back.

"My dear fellow," the other laughed, "I'm Joe's lawyer. Last spring after he hit town here and went to work for Randall, he got into a bit of trouble with a man named Peg Smith. Peg is part time puncher. part time gambler, and there's whispers that he's mixed up in a big gang of horse thieves operating in this section of the country. Whatever it was, he tried to draw a gun on Joe and Joe blocked the draw with one hand and laid Peg's scalp open with a gun barrel. I defended him in court and got him off with a fine. So last week, a rider I never saw before came after me in the night. Joe wanted to see me. I found him hid out in a camp. He's badly wounded, but he'll live."

"How'd he get shot? He was supposed to be home the past month with the folks."

SWINNERTON shrugged. "That's not a polite question to ask a lawyer, since all we barristers believe our clients to be innocent. But since you're his twin—I'll swear, I never saw such a resemblance!—I can let you have the facts. A couple months ago, Joe and Ellen Randall fell in love. Old Mike, her father—and what a rip snorter he is—hit the roof on account of Joe's drinking and making love to the girls at dances and getting into fights. He sent Joe to a summer line camp far to the north to get him away from Ellen for a while and let them cool off. But Joe got sore and threw in with Brad Morden's gang of horse thieves running stolen stock through this section of the country. They raid and collect the stock into bunches, then send some north to Oklahoma and Kansas, others to Colorado and Wyoming, and others over into New Mexico and Arizona. He helped them slip through at night, and then said he was going home for awhile and joined them in some raids.

"Well, last week they came through here with about thirty head of fine stuff, and stopped by Randall's place to pick up a few of his thoroughbred Morgans. Old Mike is crazy about his blooded stuff and keeps them under guard part of the time. Joe got shot, but got away. He sent for me. He said that if he didn't show up at the ranch on time—he was already two weeks overdue—Mike and the girl might get suspicious. He asked me to send that telegram to get you up here in a hurry, I sent it and you're here."

He paused and reached for a cigar

in a box on his desk. He bit off an end and leaned back again to light it and puff.

"In other words," Jay Allison said slowly, "I'm to take over his job and make love to the girl until he gets well enough to go back stealing horses from his boss. The answer is that Joe can go to hell. You tell him I said so. I never minded his wildness and drinking, but I'll have no part in any such mess."

Swinnerton removed the cigar from his mouth. "Joe—I mean Jay—you've got to. I told you that we lawyers believe in the innocence of our clients, though now and then we have to stretch a few points. I'm stretching one now. I'm stretching it a long way because I believe in your brother. That rifle slug through his chest seems to have knocked some sense into his head. He's a changed man. He says that is just what he needed to bring him down to earth again. He worships the ground Ellen walks on, and when this thing is over, he's cutting out the rough stuff and settling down. He's already warned Morden that when he gets back on his feet, it's quits. All he wants you to do is just take his place for a few weeks until he can ride again. Then they're getting married and going to your home for a spell. After that, he's bringing her back here to settle on Randall's ranch. Ellen has already told Mike. But Mike's a hard man to convince. Look here, Jay, every man is entitled to one mistake in life, and Joe made his. There won't be anymore. As his brother, his twin brother, you owe it to him to step into his boots for a few weeks and see that he comes out on top."

JAY ALLISON sat there and thought it over. He still didn't like any part of it. It was a fraud, and he could still remember the warm, passionate feel of Ellen Randall's lips on his when she had kissed him so fiercely. He consoled himself with the thought that he'd be in the line camp, miles from the ranch.

He nodded. "All right, Swinnerton, I'll do it for Joe's sake, even though it goes against my grain."

"Good! That's fine, fine. This will come out all right. You wait and see. Now, I'll brief you on a few things about the ranch and so on to get you through supper. After supper, you tell them you'll be out to the ranch sometime tomorrow, that you've a few things to take care of. Tonight I'll have horses ready. I'll take you to see your brother."

Jay left the office by the back way a few minutes later, the odd thought in his mind that he was mixed up in a criminal conspiracy, and already acting like a criminal. He didn't like this skulking business. His father had always taught him to meet a man half way in the open, with nothing to fear as long as a man was honest. He wasn't an honest man now, or he would have refused, point blank.

He cut in back of the hotel again and ascended the steps up to the second story hallway and made his way to the room. He opened the door and a big man pushed himself off the bed. He was in his mid-fifties, mustaches and burly. He said, "Well, I see you got back," and gruffly stuck out a hand.

"Yeah, I'm back."

"Frankly, I was hopin' you wouldn't come back," the other said without preamble. "But Ellen raised so much hell ever' time me and her ma opened our mouths, that there was no living with her. So when she come downstairs and said you was back, I wanted to have a talk with you, Joe. You can have your job back at the ranch, all right, but I want

this clearly understood: If you're going to marry her, this drinking and cutting around is going to stop. I'm not having my girl marry any man who's been cutting up the past few months like you have."

"I understand, sir," Jay said quietly. Swinnerton had said that Joe had had enough. No more of the rough stuff for him.

"Good," grunted Mike Randall. "But don't get any ideas, Joe. If you come back to work for me, you're going right back to that summer line camp and stay there until we need all the hands at the beef roundup this fall. You won't be seeing her or having anything to do with her, understand? If you and her still feel this way after the roundup, and you settle down, then maybe we'll talk about you gettin' married sometime this winter. But you've got to prove yourself, Joe. The first misstep you make, I'll chase you off the ranch with a shotgun."

"All right, sir," Jay answered.

Mike Randall looked at him queerily. "Since when did you start calling people, me especially, sir," Jay answered.

"I—uh— guess it's a habit from being home," Jay answered lamely, and felt his face flush. "Mom's pretty much of a stickler for those things."

"Good," snapped back the rancher. "Too bad you didn't stay another month. Might have pounded some sense into your head. Well, let's get on downstairs to supper. The wimminfolk are waiting. And you mind what I told you! I mean every word of it."

They went out, and Jay followed the bigger man downstairs. They passed a tall man in the lobby; a man who looked at though he had just come in from a long ride. He was thirty, and in additon to his pistol, carried a big knife in a fringed sheath. He gave Jay a queer look in which there was no friendliness, and added a brief, cold nod. Jay answered in kind, a curt jerk of the head.

Randall said, low voiced, "Looks like Peg Smith ain't forgot that little ruckus when you hit him over the head with a gun barrel. You watch out for him, Joe. He ain't the kind of a man to forget."

"Where's he working now?" Jay asked. He wanted all the information he could get.

Randall gave that particular grunt of his, "Huh!" and led the way into the dining room.

Jay took off his hat and followed the bigger man. He was dressed in a dark suit that didn't look too bad after a brushing down, and he'd had his boots shined that day at noon while the engine and crew were being changed. They set off his sleek black hair and eyes. He was thankful now that he and Joe had, like so many twins, always bought identical clothes and gear down to the utmost detail.

CHAPTER III

MRS. RANDALL was a buxom, motherly looking woman in her late forties, and quite handsome. She smiled a greeting at Jay and nodded for the two men to sit down. "It's good to see you again, Joe," she said. "How were your folks?"

"Fair to middling," he answered. "Range is pretty dry, but they'll pull through all right."

"We haven't ordered yet," Ellen said. "We were waiting on you two." She sat next to Jay, and the newly lit lamps in the dining room shone on her russet hair. He wondered how a man like his brother could turn crooked while engaged to a girl like this. That wild temper of Joe's, he guessed. Angry and resentful because Mike Randall objected to the marriage of Ellen and himself.

Well, Jay Allison thought grimly that night, he won't steal anymore horses after I get through with him.

That was one thing about Joe. He might be a bit wild and reckless, but in a pinch it had always been Jay who was the leader, who made the decisions. He was going to make more than a decision tonight: It was going to an ultimatum. Joe would snap out of it and get back in the groove, or the Randall family would be told the full details.

"Anything much doing since I left?" he asked casually, after they had ordered. He wanted all the information he could get, to index it in his mind for any contingency that might arise. He knew he was going to need it. One slip on his part and the whole thing would blow up in their faces.

Mike Randall grunted. "We're losing a trickle of cows now and then, but not enough to show any organized rustling. Mostly nesters and settlers butchering for beef, though I want you to keep a sharp lookout for that, too, when you get back. They tried another raid on the horses sometime back, but didn't make it. One of the thieves got shot, but that's all."

"Know who he was?" Jay asked, almost holding his breath. "Any sign?"

"Just a lot of blood next morning. It was a blind shot in the dark."

"When are you leaving for the ranch again?" Jay asked.

Ellen put in, "Not until tomorrow, Joe. I forgot to tell you. We're having visitors out from the east, due tomorrow. People I stayed with while I was in school back there. They want to see what life on a wild Texas ranch is like, and will stay all summer, partly for Mr. Seltzer's health. Mary, their daughter, was my best chum in school. Their son Harry used to be my best fellow; and I warn you, darling, he's almost as handsome as you. And he'll be there all summer with me while you're at the line camp. So don't be too sure of yourself."

She was bedevilling him, and he knew it. He also wondered just what kind of a retort Joe would make in this situation.

"I'll just have to hope for the best, I guess," he replied lamely, and felt a slight flush come to his face. He was thankful when the food was brought. He placed the napkin carefully over his lap and was aware that Ellen was staring at him curiously.

"You've changed, Joe," she said seriously. "What's come over you, anyhow? You're quieter, I heard you say 'sir' to Dad a moment ago, and now you're using a napkin."

"Mom's influence while I was home," he muttered, and wished he were a thousand miles away.

HE GOT through the meal somehow, listening to Randall talk feed and water shortages and possible fall beef prices. He ate carefully, and from long habit placed his knife on the edge of the plate when he picked up his fork. It was habit, the habit of years at home under his well educated mother's dictum: Correct manners or no food. Joe had been the rebellious one. Joe had said, "These tools ain't made for fancy handling. They're made for speed."

He was glad when the mince pie and coffee were done with. He wiped his lips with the napkin and rose with the others. They went out into the lobby where Mike Randall paid for the meals.

"I suppose you'll be coming out with us tomorrow?" he asked Jay.

"I imagine you'll be pretty well loaded, sir. I've got to see a few friends anyhow, so perhaps it would be better if I picked up a horse and rode out, though you could take my

warbag. I could leave it in my room."

"All right. But I want you in that camp by day after tomorrow morning, to start riding the line again. I'm short-handed and Turk's got his hands full. Them big outfits to the north are having their own trouble about water, and their stock are drifting down on us hell to breakfast to get at the water on Mesquite Creek. We're going to have one hell of a beautiful job cutting out at the fall roundup. I'll bet a hundred dollars we're grazing three hundred head of CJ steers right now. You tell Turk I said for you boys to spend every hour of daylight patrolling between camps and pushing back everything not wearing the Rafter R. We need all the feed and water we've got."

"Kay," Jay answered the way Joe would have, carelessly. "We'll take care of 'em. And now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to see a few folks."

"In the bars," Ellen said quietly. "You haven't been home for a month now, and the minute you get back you have to go out and see friends. So maybe you haven't changed such a lot after all, Joe. Would it be asking too much if you walked down to the post office with me to get the ranch mail? We got in too late for me to get it before supper."

"Sure," he said, and took her arm with exaggerated gallantry.

They went out into the street. It was dusk now and a bit cooler. Lights had come on in various buildings, mostly the saloons where poker, dice, domino and checker games were in progress, some for money and some for pleasure. The store fronts lay dark and deserted, and here and there a sleepy cow pony stood patiently at a hitch rack.

The post office was a false fronted, weatherbeaten building with a line of boxes across the room. It was deserted, but Ellen went over to a large box, turned the dial, and pulled out a big drawer half filled with letters and papers.

"We haven't been in for two weeks now," she said. "But the Seltzers said they'd be here on the fifteenth, and that's tomorrow. I—why, Joe! Here's a letter for you from your mother. And here's two more! How come she was writing you when you were home all the time?"

She rose and faced him. "Joe," she said quietly, "your mother wrote you every week since you've been on the ranch. You've been gone a little over three weeks and here's three letters from her. You weren't home at all, were you?"

I've got to think fast, he thought desperately. Damn this mess, anyhow. Why was I fool enough to let myself get mixed up in it? I should have known we couldn't get away with it.

He said, "Of course she wrote, honey. Mom's sentimental. She's also a creature of firm and rigid habits. She wrote me every week while I was home. I tried to bedevil her to let me see the letters, but she chased me out of her writing room. Said I could read 'em after I got back. You don't know Mom."

"Oh," she was partly convinced. "I guess that's it, but—"

HE HAD to stop it, and he did in the only way he knew how. It was rather dim inside the foyer of the post office, and the boardwalk outside was deserted. He summoned the courage and grabbed her in his arms. He kissed her and the mail fluttered to the floor. He clung to her and gave off those foolish little whimpers Joe always did, and he worked his lips along her cheek to kiss the folds of red hair. Finally, she pushed him back, her face flushed with happiness.

"Get away from me, you wild man," she gasped. "I thought at first you

had changed. I know better now. Here, pick up that mail while I arrange my hair and get back my breath."

He picked up the scattered mail from the floor while she arranged a tuft of dislocated hair back into position, working with a hair pin, and the crazy thought came over him that he'd like to see that mass of flame colored hair let out full and hanging free with the wind blowing through it.

"And now, Mistress Ellen," he said, using another of Joe's gallant and exaggerated expressions, "may I go?"

"Get out of here!" she laughed. "Go on about your business. I can walk back to the hotel alone."

She went back to the hotel and up to the suite of rooms reserved for her mother and father. Mrs. Randall was out, probably visiting with friends in town. Her father was gone, too, possibly playing checkers and talking cattle with friends. She sat down and began to read a letter from Mary Seltzer, saying that they would arrive on the prearranged date.

In another hotel room, her father sat talking with the tall man who wore both knife and pistol at his belt: Peg Smith.

Smith was blond and lanky, with bright blue eyes that were both piercing and sardonic, his droopy mustache adding to the appearance of a taciturn man who looked upon his fellow men with contemptuous tolerance. He was bold, he was dangerous, and his gun had been for hire.

Randall was saying, "...haven't found out anything more, eh?"

Peg Smith shook his head. "Just what I told you. I got one of them that night while yore boys were shooting at them. I'da sworn it was Joe Allison. It shore looked like him. But I couldn't be shore of it because yore men were shootin' wild an' didn't know anything about me being hired by you to keep an eye on things. Anyhow, looks like it wasn't Joe. Any man who ketches a 45-70 slug the way I caught that hoss thief, wouldn't show up a little later as chipper as can be. Whoever got thet slug thet night, won't be around fer quite some time—if he ever gits back."

"You wouldn't have any ideas about settling a personal grudge with Joe, would you?" Mike Randall asked harshly.

"Nope," was the laconic reply. "I'm workin' fer you, Mister Randall, an' as long as I am, you give the orders."

"Good. That's more like it. So you follow right on through. Make your run nights between the ranch and the north line cabin country. Somewhere in that country, Brad Morden and his gang are running their stolen horses. It's across my range and I want it stopped. I don't only want it stopped. I don't want any more raids on my Morgans."

"What about Joe?"

"Trail him. He seems a little bit changed since he came back, but I'm makin' danged sure he's turned over a new leaf before I let him marry Ellen this winter."

"Fair enough," Smith drawled and rose. Randall rose, too. He said, "See me now and then when you can, but don't let anybody know you're working for me. And if Brad Morden shows up anywhere on my range, you let me know in a hurry. I'll chase that damned horse thief so far, he'll have a long beard before he gets back."

CHAPTER IV

JAY ALLISON watched her go, then stepped between the post office and a general store building. He came out in the alley and sprinted for the back of the hotel. The hallway was

deserted, and he went in and got the gunnysack containing his saddle gear and rifle. He carried it back down the stairs and set off in the darkness. Two hundred yards further on, he came to the back end of a shed. He heard the stomp of a horse's hoof and unconsciously froze; but Swinnerton had pointed out the rendevous from the back of his office. Jay moved on and saw the man loom up out of the night. He didn't see the figure of Peg Smith following him.

"That you, Jay," asked the lawyer's voice.

"It's me."

"Good. That your saddle? Fine. I'm ready to go. Throw your kak on that bay and we'll get under way. We've got a long ride ahead of us."

Jay undid the sack and brought out saddle and bridle and chaps. He saddled up the already caught horse and slid his repeater into the boot. It was the work of minutes to slip on his chap and spurs.

"All set, I guess," he said. "How far?"

He swung up into leather and Swinnerton, leading his horse to open the gate of the small corral, said, "About twenty miles. We can make it before midnight. I'll stay over and come back tomorrow. Nobody pays any attention to the comings and goings of the town lawyer. Sometimes I'm gone for days. My clients are scattered over a wide range."

Jay rode out and the lawyer soon swung in beside him. They left the town behind, the lights finally disappearing back of a swell in the prairie. They rode north and a little east and the stars were out, bright and clear. It was cool, and from the distance came the mournful sounding howl of a coyote. One of the horses sneezed and then blew a hard, slobbering sound.

They rode on for three miles, engaging in brief snatches of conversation, and sometimes jogging in silence. Swinnerton told him the approximate location of the Rafter R some twenty miles due north of Ashbury. The line cabin was another fifteen miles or so on north.

It was big country, a country of vast spaces stretching away to the horizons as far as a man could see on a clear day, and then on into the beyond. A land of great grassy swells, of gullies and dry creek beds and rounded hummocks, of mesquite forests spotted by the ever-present clumps of evergreen cedars along the gully banks. They made odd shapes in the night and once, when they pulled up to let their horses blow a bit and light a cigarette, Jay said sharply to the lawyer, "Hold that match!"

He swung down and laid his ear to the ground. He heard nothing. He gave the curious Swinnerton the reins of his horse and went back along the trail for a hundred yards. He came back and swung up.

"Well?" the lawyer inquired.

"One man," Jay said briefly. "He's swung to the east and trying to come in ahead."

"Why?"

Jay shrugged in the night. "You got any enemies?"

It was Swinnerton's turn to shrug. "Every lawyer has, but I don't know of any who'd try an ambush on me."

"What about Joe?"

"Well, what about him?" grunted the lawyer.

"I saw Peg Smith in town. That's the man you said got his scalp laid open by a gun barrel. Randall said he was a man not to forget, and for me to watch out. He was in the hotel lobby."

"I haven't seen him in some time. But what's the next move now?"

JAY LED off to the left, keeping his position by the stars. They

angled for a quarter of a mile until, crossing a sharp ridge, sound might be bracketed. Once on the other side, they set off at a fast lope. It lasted for a quarter of a mile and again Jay pulled up. He waited for the sound of his horse's heavy breathing to subside somewhat, and that was almost a mistake.

The shot came from out of the night, not more than sixty yards away. It was a rifle. Jay heard the big spanging report, saw the brief orange flash, and began thumbing his six shooter. He fired four times, and listened to the sound of a running horse heading away to the north.

He sat in the saddle and punched out the empty shells and reloaded and clicked shut the cylinder gate on the Colt. It went back into leather and Swinnerton said, "Whoever he was, he'll try again. We can try a run around him because he might hear us. It looks like a long detour. He can't pick up our trail until morning, and if he tries to follow it, one of Brad's boys will stop him cold. Only he'll be shooting in daylight and won't miss."

Jay felt his breath go out in surprise as the lawyer led off. "Are you taking me to Brad Morden's camp?" he demanded.

"I'm taking you to where Joe is with some of Brad's men looking out after him," Swinnerton said. "I told you I'm a lawyer. I fight for my clients."

Jay let him take the lead then, and they rode on through the night for what seemed to be hours and hours. The stars told him it was after midnight when at last they entered a sharp defile and dropped down a canyon. They rode at a walk now, and Swinnerton began to sing in a low voice that carried far through the night. They followed the defile until the canyon opened up, and from somewhere out of the night came a man's voice. It was not more than thirty feet away.

"Ease up and rest, gents. Stand pat and call yore names."

"It's Jim," the lawyer said. "That you, Charley?"

A man's form came through the night. He carried a repeating rifle in his hands. "Yep. Who's with you?"

"A friend," Jay answered quickly.

"All right, mister," chuckled back the voice of the guard. "Pass on, Jim, you and Mister Friend."

Swinnerton gigged his horse into motion and Jay followed. The night swallowed up the guard in its back arms. They rode across the flat floor of the valley and through lush grass almost knee high. Presently, oblong shapes that moved came into view—grazing horses.

Jim Swinnerton seemed to read Jay's thoughts. "They're pickup stuff Brad has collected here and there. His main hangout is over on Antelope Creek, forty miles from here. He's got several camps like this. The boys slip out a few head at a time and drive them over to Antelope. Sometimes they hair burn the brands and sometimes they blot, all depending. When they get a big enough bunch, Brad starts a night drive of up to a hundred head, pushing them fast to wherever he's agreed to meet his buyer. Sometimes west to New Mexico, other times Oklahoma or Colorado."

"You seem to know quite a lot about it," Jay observed dryly.

Again that chuckle through the night. "A lawyer is like a doctor, Jay. He has to know a little bit about everybody. And then keep his mouth shut. Brad and his boys are no friends of mine. But you never can tell when some of them might become clients. I brought you out here tonight because of an interest I have in a client—your brother. It's what

any good lawyer would do to protect the men who come to him for help. There's the light of the cabin about a half mile ahead. Looks like some of the boys might be up late."

THEY WERE passing among more grazing horses, and even in the darkness Jay could see that it was all fine looking stuff. He said, "They've got some nice looking stock here."

Swinnerton's chuckle came through the night. "You bet it's nice stuff. Brad Morden's one passion in life is good horseflesh. He worships them and steals only the best. And I'll bet he'll never get a full night's sleep until he gets his hands on Mike Randall's blooded Morgans."

The camp loomed up closer. Jay saw the outlines of three corrals of pole and brush and a crude cabin of brush daubed over with mud. They rode up and swung down. The door opened on rawhide leather hinges and a man's voice called, "Who is it? That you, Red?"

"Nope," answered Swinnerton, swinging down. "It's not Red."

"Oh, hullo, Jim. Who you got with you?"

"Friend of mine."

"Come on in. I'll fix some grub if you're hungry."

Jay followed the lawyer in and saw him shake hands with a big, sandy-haired man of about forty. He turned and said, "Jay, I want you to meet Brad Morden."

Jay stuck out his hand and Morden took it, his jaw almost sagging. "It ain't true," he burst out. "I'm seein' it with my own eyes, but it ain't true. This is Joe!"

"He will be for awhile," chuckled the lawyer.

Jay's eyes flicked around the room to four other men, all watching him with curious stares.

"Where's Joe?" he asked abruptly.

"Shucks," grinned the horse thief. "No reason to get in a hurry. Plenty of time after we talk a bit. Jim and me got to pow-wow with you. You're goin' to help us steal Randall's herd of Morgans."

Jay swung around to let his cold eyes play on Swinnerton's face. It was all clear now. The lawyer saw the look and grinned. "Yep, you guessed it, Jay. Brad and I are pardners. And you're going to play ball with us, or Joe will never get back to the ranch."

"Where is he?" repeated Jay harshly.

"Shot up plumb bad," Morden replied. "You'll see him in time. Right now, we want to talk with you. We've got to pull out of here in a couple of hours and drive these horses two hundred and twenty miles before their former owners guess where they might be. Come over and set down."

Jay sat down beside the stove and Morden nodded toward the big, fire-blackened coffee pot. "Help yourself, Jay. Jim, I didn't think it would work. Didn't think no two men could look so much alike thet one could take the othern's place. But it'll work slick as a whistle."

He poured himself some more coffee and lifted the tincup—sort of a mocking salute to Jay Allison. "I'll give you the setup here, Jay, and what you're goin' to do if you ever want to see yore brother well again. Jim and me are in the hoss collecting business. Him bein' a lawyer, he allus manages to find out from his clients how many and what kind of stock they and their rancher friends have on hand. He passes the word along to me, and the boys and me bide our time and then raid. They try to trail us sometimes, sure. But we've got ways of throwin' 'em off. When we can't shake a posse, we leave a

good man behind with a long range rifle to ambush 'em. That's on big raids. Other times, we slip in and get one or two head of the best stuff, and are gone a day or two before they realize the stuff has been stole. On the small raids, we collect 'em here at camps like this, and then drive either direct across the state line or sometimes to my main camp on Antelope Creek."

HE PAUSED and sipped the coffee and Jay sat, wooden faced and unmoving. Swinnerton had his chair back against the wall and was smoking a cigar. Morden went on: "But there's one band of hosses Jim and me ain't been able to get yet, and thet's the sixty or so head of thoroughbred Morgans on Mike Randall's place. We tried it a few nights ago, but they was well guarded, and in the melee Joe, who was helpin' us, got caught by a big slug. We got him out of there, but he near bled to death. He's an awful sick boy, mister, and he's goin' to be a mighty sick one for some time to come. It'll be a long time before he's up and around ag'in. He never told anybody but Jim about havin' a twin brother the spittin' image of him. That was when Jim was defendin' him for whackin' Peg Smith over the head with a pistol. Said he never told people he had a twin on account of the fun you boys could have when the t'othern showed up."

Jay remembered all too well, and the memory of it brought an inner smile. They had a regular routine to work on strangers that convulsed their friends sitting around in a bar room. Joe would leave by the back door, ostensibly to go to the outhouse. Almost immediately, Jay would stroll in and order a drink of beer. He'd drink it and go out the front door, and Joe would promptly appear through the back one again, blandly explaining he'd lost his jackknife and was hunting it around the building. They confused hotel proprietors, waitresses, bartenders and railroad conductors. And when Jay, after dating a girl a few times, would let Joe "sub" for him some night, the results were hilarious.

And now he was substituting again, in a game in which there was nothing to laugh about; a game where a slipup meant death.

Brad Morden's voice droned on: "Anyhow, nobody but Jim and me knowed about you. So when Joe got shot, we had to think fast. I've got a man or two on Randall's payroll, but if Joe showed up missin', crazy like he is over thet Randall girl, it might look suspicious. So you're goin' right on the ranch and take over Joe's old job. You're goin' to be Joe Allison from now on, workin' fer Brad Morden an' Jim Swinnerton. You'll take yore old line cabin job back and Turk will show you the ropes on how to help us get the stolen stuff across Randall's range. He'll show you all the signals and other ways we have of keepin' in touch with one another. You'll ride to the ranch as often as you kin an' find out about them blooded Morgans. The first time anything looks as though we git a break on it, you'll burn the breeze to Antelope Creek camp and let us know."

"Did it ever occur to you that I might tell you to go to hell?" Jay asked softly.

Morden looked at him and chuckled goodnaturedly. "Natcherly. But I don't think you will because I'm goin' to let you see Joe an' talk with him. He'll tell you Brad Morden ain't the kind of a man to let people run a shinny bluff on him. You'll do as we say, because if you refuse, I'll

drag Joe out of his bed and hang him with a slow rope and then run you down. It's his life, or my orders to you."

Jay set down the cup and sneered at him. He sneered openly, insultingly. "So that's how you treat a man who got shot stealing for you? I suppose that's about what could be expected of a yellow-bellied horse thief and renegade lawyer. And I know what to expect when you don't need us anymore. All right, I'll play ball with you. But if anything happens to Joe, I'll hunt you down and cut your throat with a dull knife, Morden. Now, where's my brother?"

Brad Morden rose, smiling. "Right through that blanket into the lean-to. I expect he'll be glad to see you."

CHAPTER V

JAY ALLISON stepped across the dirt floor and pushed aside the dirty blanket covering the opening. The lean-to was pretty small and dirty, and on a bunk in a corner a man lay sleeping, the flickering light of a lone candle playing over his unshaved face. It took a second look to recognize the bandaged figure as Joe. His skin was a pale transparent sheet drawn over prominent cheek bones, and filled with hollows. He lay on his back, breathing torturously even in his sleep. Jay felt himself get sick at the sight of his brother.

This, he thought, was what had happened because of Joe's foolish resentment toward Mike Randall because the rancher didn't relish him as a prospective son-in-law. Turned horse thief to square accounts, and got himself thoroughly shot up with a heavy caliber rifle.

Jay sat down on the edge of the bunk, first realizing what lay ahead of him. It meant months—endless months—of masquerading; being a horse thief, taking Morden's and Swinnerton's orders; helping to run stolen horses across his boss's range. Months of deceiving a red-haired girl.

But the solution came to him as he looked down at Joe's haggard, unwashed face. He'd play the masquerade until Joe was well enough to ride. Then he'd quit his job on some excuse, such as having to help at home with the fall roundup. He and Joe would streak out, lighting a shuck for home. There, they could concoct a story to satisfy their mother and put Joe under her care. And, when he was fully recovered, he could come back to the girl.

Jay bent closer and touched his brother's bared right arm. That scar on it was a bullet burn by a man who had missed. A man who was now dead because Jay's shot hadn't missed. That was the way it had always been between them: Sticking together and playing the game one for the other. That was the way it was going to be now.

"Joe," Jay Allison said softly, and shook the arm gently. "Joe, wake up. It's me."

Joe Allison opened his eyes and groaned. He adjusted his sight to the room with its lone candle, and finally focused his gaze on his twin brother.

"Good to see you, old timer," he whispered. "So you got here?"

Jay nodded. "I got Swinnerton's telegram and grabbed the next train. He told me what the setup is. I got in this evening. I ran into Mike Randall in the Ford Hotel."

"Did you see Ellen?" asked Joe.

"Yes. They're in town to pick up some eastern family coming in on the train tomorrow."

A new light came into the pain-sunken eyes. "Ain't she a dream, Jay? Tell me, what did she do when she

saw you?"

THERE WASN'T any use in lying, so Jay, grinning ruefully, told him. "Well, she grabbed me and kissed me and then figured I'd certainly changed a lot during the month while I was down home."

"That's Ellen, and she's my baby," came in a half laugh from the bandaged man. "Jay, there's nobody in all this world like her. I just lost my head and got sore at Mike because he didn't like the way I do things."

"I know. He laid down the law. Turn over a new leaf and work hard, and maybe this winter you can marry her. But you got to prove yourself first."

"I know. And you, stepping into my boots, are just the boy who can do it. I made a hell of a stupid mistake, Jay. The most damn fool mistake a man ever made. That Allison temper, I guess. I must have been crazy. But everything is all right now. You take over for me until I get well. When I'm able to ride again, I'm stepping right back into my own boots and taking over where you left off. And I'll fill 'em too, you wait and see."

"You'd better, Joe," his brother said. "She's too fine a girl to be let down. And there can't be any doubt about it: You're her man. She teased me about a handsome fellow in this family from the east who used to be her sweetheart. But it was only a tease."

Flame came into the sunken eyes where before there had been light. "Of course she was teasing. But if he tries to cut in, I'll kill him. I'll kill any man who tries to put his rope on her. I love her too much, and I'm going to prove it to her, and you, too."

"You'll have to," Jay answered, and rose. "You got a razor?"

He didn't tell his twin brother the rest of it; that Joe was a prisoner, held hostage on pain of death unless Jay obeyed the orders of Morden and Swinnerton. There was no use in letting him know now.

"A razor? Nope, but some of the boys have. You goin' to try shaving me?"

"This place stinks like a pig pen. You haven't had much care."

He turned to see Brad Morden leaning in the doorway, Swinnerton looking over his shoulder. "We've been listening," the bigger man said, and there was a mockery in his voice that the sick Joe Allison didn't catch. "Glad to know everything is going to turn out all right."

"I want some hot water," Jay said shortly, and half pushed them aside.

He heated water on the stove, a big pan of it, and went to work. He shaved Joe first. That done, he stripped the blankets from the bed and took them out to air. Joe lay on the dirty straw and cussed while his brother bathed him with a wash rag and soap and warm water. He removed the bandages and washed them in the bath water and then laid them across the hot stove to dry quickly. By the time Joe was back in the aired-out blankets and asleep again, the riders were moving out. One man was to remain behind to look after Joe Allison. The others were out rounding up the horses for the long run across the state line to buyers who didn't ask too may questions.

Morden came back into the shack, leaving his horse outside. He was dressed for travel, spurred, chapped and gunbelted. "We'll be gone a couple of weeks or so," he told Jay Allison. "You take yore old job back with Randall, listen to what Turk Pennock has to say, and obey any orders Jim gives you. I'll be back one of these days. So long, Jim. Take good care of 'Joe Allison'."

They shook hands. "I will," the lawyer said. "Good running to you boys. Don't pick up any posses."

"Nuthin' like a good posse to make life interestin'," chuckled the outlaw.

He went out the door and into the night. Saddle leather creaked as he swung up. The sound of his horse's hoof beats faded away into the muffled drum that told of fifty or sixty head of horses trotting up the valley. The stolen stock were now all on their way.

Swinnerton yawned and stretched. "I'm turning in in one of the boy's bunks, Jay. You'd better do the same. Lot of riding to do tomorrow."

THE MAN who was to look after Joe was already sound asleep in a corner bunk. Jay removed chaps and spurs and pulled off his boots. He tip-toed in for a last look at his brother. But Joe was sound asleep and the look on his face was different now. Everything would be all right.

Yes, Jay Allison thought that night as he lay in the darkness, everything will be all right. It's got to be all right.

He couldn't let his brother down. And he couldn't break the heart of a red-headed girl who loved Joe Allison so much.

He rolled out early from force of habit and built a fire in the stove. By the time Swinnerton and the member of Brad Morden's horse thief crew came alive, Jay had breakfast ready. He fed Joe first and then ate and went out and saddled up his horse.

"You leaving so soon?" Joe asked, when Jay returned.

Jay nodded. "I've got a long ride ahead of me. I want you to tell me how to get to the ranch, what it looks like, everything about your job. Tell me everything you think I ought to know. Just remember, Joe, one slip on my part and your whole house of corn cobs is going to come tumbling down around your ears. She'll hate you for the rest of your life. Mike Randall might get over it in time. I guess he was a young buck in love himself. But not your girl Ellen. So I've got to be careful. I don't want you getting your booze to heal a busted-down cob house."

"Boy, them's the best words I ever heard," Joe Allison grinned. "From now on, I'm going to get well fast. I'll be up and around in no time, now that you're on the job."

He talked at length, and after a time Jay bid him goodbye and went out to his horse. He swung up and looked down at Swinnerton, his eyes cold. "I'm playing the game your way on account of my brother, Swinnerton. I'll tell Mike Randall that I borrowed this horse from you because you defended me in court for hitting Peg Smith over the head with a gun barrel. I got a hunch that it was Smith who made that play with a rifle last night. Just a hunch. Anyhow, I'm playing the game. But what I told Brad Morden holds good for you, too. If anything happens to Joe while I'm gone, God help you!"

He rode out of the valley that morning, following a winding trail that led out on top. Here, he could see the country for miles around, and he felt better. Whoever had tried to kill "Joe" Allison with a rifle wouldn't have such luck in daylight, where a man could keep to the open spaces. He angled north and a bit east, keeping in mind the terrain as Swinnerton and his brother had described it. At noon, he stopped long enough to water his horse and let the animal forage a bit while he ate the cold bacon and biscuit sandwiches he had prepared. He brewed a pot of coffee and sat in the shade of a cedar drinking it, letting the horse graze. After-

ward, he tightened the loosed cinch, mounted and went on.

He was in no particular hurry. Just the opposite, in fact. There was the ordeal of coming to the ranch and getting another horse to ride on to the line camp. He hoped fervently that the Randalls would not yet have arrived from town with their eastern visitors.

But about two-thirty, he saw his hopes doomed to disappointment. He had come out on top of a ridge where a wide swale some four miles across ran due north, and down in the middle of it he saw the rig. It was travelling along a single road leading from the town miles to the south, and unless he changed direction, he'd have to meet them sooner or later. In his role of Joe Allison, it wouldn't look good to be ducking away.

HE LET the horse take its time and jogged down into the swale. Two miles further on he came in at an angle, and finally rode in alongside the rig. Randall was driving the surrey with a handsome young man and an older man up front with him. In the rear were Mrs. Randall, two strange women and Ellen. She waved gaily as "Joe" jogged in alongside. Mike Randall pulled the rig to a stop. Jay lounged in the saddle.

"So you made it all right," the rancher observed and rolled a smoke.

"Jim Swinnerton loaned me one of his horses," Jay said. "I'm to leave it at the ranch until one of the boys comes into town. Jim said have one bring it in and leave it in his corral."

"Joe," Ellen put in, "this is Mary, and Mrs. Seltzer, and that's Mr. Seltzer and Harry."

Jay shook hands with the older man, obviously a man of wealth, slender and rather peaked looking. "Glad to meet you, sir," he greeted. "You look like some fresh air and sunshine and ranch grub wouldn't hurt a bit."

"It won't," laughed the other. "I'll be riding a horse around the place in no time."

Harry Seltzer was about twenty-three, brown haired and handsome. He had the wiry, slender build of the athlete, and Jay surmised that he'd pick up the ranch life fast. Mary extended a slim hand as Jay leaned from the saddle and took it, tipping his hat.

"Happy to make your acquaintance, Joe," she murmured. "Ellen has written me much about you."

Mike Randall shifted the lines and said, "Well, we'd better be gettin' on to the ranch. Want to get these folks installed before their baggage comes out this evenin'. You going on to the line camp tonight, or will you make an early start in the morning?"

"Tonight, I expect. I—"

"You will not!" Ellen cut in indignantly. "I haven't seen you in a month, and when I do, I only get a chance to talk five minutes. You can get up early in the morning just as well."

Jay grinned. "We'll see."

They drove on and he jogged by and presently left them behind. The road wound down the middle of the wide swale and, after a couple of miles, twisted around a promontory to change course. Here, the swale was dotted with what looked like hundreds of cattle and horses and, in the distance another couple of miles, he saw the outlines of the ranch house. He put his horse into a lope and went on. After a time, the corrals and sheds and the big house showed up nearer and Jay felt that slight constriction hit his middle. He'd have to meet men at the ranch who knew him, and there mustn't be any misstep. One slip and Joe's future would be ruined.

He rode up to a big horse corral. There was a windmill just outside the China wood fence with one end of the big wooden trough sticking through the poles into the corral. Jay swung down and led the horse inside. A rider, apparently the bronk stomper of the outfit, was working with a bay gelding. It was saddled and bridled and the stomper had ropes from the bit running back through the stirrups and was walking and trotting it around by turns, teaching it the meaning of reins.

He called a cheerful, "Hello, Joe. So you finally got back?"

Jay nodded and uncinched, carrying his saddle over to a shed with a long pole under it. This was a saddle shed, protecting the men's gear from the elements. He carried his rifle over to the bunkhouse. It was deserted, and for that he was glad. He prowled each bunk until he came to one with some letters stuffed under a pillow. They were from his mother to Joe. He laid the rifle on it, removed his chaps, and lay down to smoke.

CHAPTER VI

PRESENTLY, a bed creaked from the lean-to cookshack built on the south side of the bunkhouse and Jay heard grunts, followed by the rattle of the stove. It looked as though the cook had been taking an afternoon nap and had just gotten up. Jay rose and went in to meet a pleasant faced man of forty. He wore a chef's cap, a white jacket and apron, and he didn't wear boots as most of them did. Jay sized him up as a probable easterner.

"How are you, Joe?" he greeted. "Glad to see you back. Anything new?"

"Nothing much. I was with the folks down home. How about here?"

The cook was stirring coals in the firebox of the big castiron kitchen range. "Nothing much except a horse raid the other night. But Mr. Randall always pulls them Morgans up in close pasture at night and keeps two of the boys on guard. There was considerable shooting, and I hear one man got shot. The old man cussed a blue streak. You should of heard him. He said if they'd have got Blue Star or Lilly Bell or Rover Boy, he'd have followed them all the way to hell and back. He would have, too. When did you get in?"

"Half hour ago. The family is right behind in a surrey with the visitors. I just passed them a— Sounds like them coming now."

The cook went to the back door of the lean-to and looked out. The surrey with its four visitors was trotting past one of the corrals toward the big house sixty yards distant.

"I'd better go out and give them a hand with the team," Jay said casually and left. Randall had warned him that he had to make good. Jay couldn't imagine the carefree Joe helping unharness a team unless ordered to do so; but this would be a good start.

He strolled over to where the six were getting down, the easterners a little tiredly.

"Joe, I've got your warbag stuffed under the back seat," the rancher boomed as his man came up. "Knew you'd need it. Our visitors' baggage won't be out 'til some time later. Sol didn't have an extra rig he could send out until late. You folks go in and cool off a bit while Joe and me unharness this team. Then, "John," this to Seltzer, "I'm goin' to take you down back of the corrals and show you some of the finest hoss flesh that ever pounded a hoof."

Jay took his warbag and dumped it in the bunkhouse. By the time he

came out, the rancher had the rig down by a shed and was beginning to unhook. They freed the span and watched them go into the corral to drink and roll, then took the surrey tongue and backed it under a big shed.

Joe left him and went down past the last corral. Here, the ground fell away a bit to a lower swale where the grass was lush and several windmills clanked idly in the gentle afternoon breeze. There were no tanks on any of them except one. The rest of the mills trickled their streams into the lush grass and sank into the earth to produce green at a time of the year when there was little green. This much expense the cattleman had gone to to see that his beloved blooded horses got the best.

JAY HEARD voices and saw the party coming down, and he noted that Harry Seltzer walked with Ellen. Randall was talking and gestulating. They came up to where Jay leaned over the barbed wire fence of the pasture. Out beyond it, the lush vegetation was dotted with sleek coated mares and colts, geldings, and two big studs. Magnificent brutes with long flowing dark manes and high heads.

Randall leaned over the fence and blew a shrill whistle between his fingers. Grazing heads raised, and there came an answering whistle from one of the stallions.

"That's Blue Star," Randall said, the pride of ownership in his voice. "Look at him start ambling this way. I've owned a lot of horses in my day, John, but never a bunch like this. And Star is the king of them all. Rover Boy—he's that dun colored gelding—is a little bigger and maybe a little mean, but I'd match Star against him any day to run him down and kill him on his feet. Come on, boys! Come on over here," and he whistled again.

They came in trickles, the mares, docile looking and long tailed, plodding with their big colts. Randall leaned over the fence and took a handful of sugar from his pocket. Blue Star whistled and came up to nibble with velvety lips.

Jay found Ellen standing beside him, leaning over the top strand of the wire. He saw the russet of her hair, the clear skin not too browned despite her years of outdoor life, and he felt that his brother was the luckiest man alive when it came to love. She was wonderful.

The others were engaged with the horses that now stood crowding each other to get at the sugar. All except Rover Boy. The big stallion stood aloof, arrogance and equine disdain in every line of his sleek body.

"He's an iron jawed devil," Ellen said. "I've tried time after time to make Dad give in and let me ride him, but he won't."

Jay knew what his brother would have said, and he said it. "He'd better not. I don't want my baby killed."

He slid his arm around her waist and nuzzled his face in her hair.

"Joe, you devil!" she whispered, pushing him away. "You know what that does to me. Makes me want to put both arms around your neck and bite you. Cut it out, you fool! They'll see us."

Riders were beginning to appear, small dots that gradually grew larger. From out of the distance, a Mexican herder astride a burro drive in a flock of milk cows, the bell on one of them tinkling. They came down the lane formed by two rows of tall poplars and moved toward the corrals. In the distance as far as the eye could see, lay vastness. Northward stretched the four mile wide swale until it disappeared toward the territories two hundred miles away. It

was a wild country, big and unsettled except for lonely ranches and homesteads. The railroad stopped at Ashbury. Beyond it lay the frontier where Brad Morden had his headquarters on Antelope Creek. Morden, the horse thief who never bothered with cattle. Joe had told him that the outlaw not only had a passion for good horses, but that their fleetness of foot made stealing them less of a risk than the slower, lumbering cattle. He stole nothing but the best, and thoroughbreds within a range of two hundred miles were never safe. That was why Mike Randall kept his under night guard.

THE GROUP turned and soon strolled back toward the big ranch house. Randall was talking and gestulating.

"Yep, she's a big and rugged country, John. But it's tamed down a lot now. You should have seen it after I got back from the war between the states."

"So you were in the war? So was I. With the Vermonters."

"I didn't see too much of it. Got shot off my horse and spent the rest of the time in a Union prison. Maw didn't recognize me when I got back. I was a scare-crow and had a beard like a horse's tail." He laughed at the memory of it.

"But we were penniless and there wasn't any use crying because Texans lost a fight. I had work to do. There were tens of thousands of unbranded cattle that had bred during the war when we were all away fighting. I started putting iron on every critter I could catch. The damned Commanches didn't like that at all, so between fighting wild cattle and holding off the red devils, Maw and me had a time of it. But we made it."

"How many cattle have you?" the easterner asked.

"About five thousand now. I used to run 'twixt seven and eight thousand, but the range wouldn't hold 'em. You can only graze about seventy-five to a section of good grass a year, and some of my range ain't too good. So I cut down by selling off some of my stockers."

"What about these cattle rustlers?"

Randall gave off a sour grunt. "Never was a big outfit that didn't have cattle stole from it. Nesters never raise their own beef. They just go out and butcher some rancher's yearling. Lots of young cow punchers who ain't got money enough to start up an outfit of their own, swing a wide loop on big outfits' cattle. Sometimes, they'll shoot the calf's mother and hide her, though the buzzards are a tell tale sign to riders. Other times, they'll burn her hooves with a hot iron so's she can't foller the calf when it's driven off. If they're stealing from a big outfit with a certain brand, sometimes they'll devise a brand that they can use a running iron on and change it over to theirs. A good brand blotter can do a job that can't be told unless you skin off the hide and can see the old mark underneath. We're purty safe here from anything except organized rustling on a big scale, because the man stealing a few cows has to drive them hundreds of miles to market, and that don't pay."

"Why couldn't they take them to the railroad at Ashbury and ship them?" asked Seltzer.

Mike Randall's grin showed at the easterner's lack of cow country knowledge. "They dassent try it at all, John. You see, at every shipping point we have a state appointed brand inspector right at the loadin' chutes. That man knows his business. Rustlers get careless sometimes, and any brand that ain't been blotted perfectly will stand out like a sore thumb.

He knows who the rancher is, how many head he's got, and he likes to see a bill of sale for any 'bought' stuff. Nope, it's not cattle rustlers I worry about. It's that Brad Morden and his gang of horse thieves that causes me to lose sleep. He tried once to get this bunch of blooded Morgans, and he'll try ag'in. But I got line cabins thirty miles apart all around my range with two riders in each cabin. They patrol my boundaries all day long and watch for tracks. The minute they spot tracks of any strange riders, they either foller or burn the breeze to the ranch."

The others had been following along behind, listening. Jay knew now why Morden could get into the ranch. With this fellow Turk Pennock and Joe in one cabin, that gave the horse thief a corridor approximately sixty miles wide to ride through with immunity. Randall's holding covered sixty square miles.

THEY WENT up to the great T-shaped ranch house with its long, shady verandas. Randall had laid pipe from his water tower and put in big lawns and shrubbery. Jay ate supper, served by Mexican servants, half way glad that Ellen had insisted that he eat with them. He had never set eyes on the dozen or so riders down in the bunkhouse and wanted to avoid them as much as possible, for fear of making a blunder. He got through the meal somehow and, later, the folks went out on the cool porch to sit in comfortable chairs and smoke. But that uncomfortableness was still upon him.

He rose from where he sat beside Ellen. "Seems to me I'd ought to get on up to the line camp tonight while it's cool and get an early start in the morning," he said casually. "So I think I'll saddle up and get going."

"Might be a good idea," the rancher observed, assiduously. Jay was still remembering the "lecture" Ellen's father had given him the evening before and he understood the man's attitude. "Tell Turk I said to keep a sharp lookout for horse tracks and let me know in a hurry if any are crossing my range. And anything you see wearing a strange brand, push it across the line. We need all the grass we've got. If we don't get some rains pretty soon..."

He left the rest of it unsaid. Jay walked over and shook hands with the Seltzers, Mary last. "I'm glad I met you folks. Hope you like it out here."

She had risen. He saw in the light from the front window that she was an astonishingly pretty woman.

"I don't know much about the workings of a ranch, Joe, but from what I gather, we won't be seeing much of you for awhile. Is that right?" she asked him.

"That's about the size of it," he grinned. "Not until the fall roundup, and then we'll be out on the range with the chuckwagons after we clean up around the ranch. I'm glad I met you, Miss Seltzer."

"I'm glad I met you, Joe," she answered simply. "Take good care of yourself."

Ellen had missed none of it. As Jay turned to go, she linked her arm within his and they walked down toward the bunkhouse.

"Don't you go getting any ideas, Mr. Joe Allison," she hissed in his ear. "I know you too well. So you think she's pretty, do you?"

He was playing the role of his brother now and made the appropriate answer. "You bet she is!" he said with enthusiasm. "Ah, those eyes and lips. Yi-yi-yi!"

"Cut it out, Joe." She was dead serious now. She stopped and turned to face him. "Mary is my best friend

and I don't want her for a rival. I never loved any man until I met you, Joe. I had plenty of chances, God knows, from love sick cow punchers to plain opportunists who had an eye on the ranch. You were the only one who ignored me, laughed at me, and flaunted other women in my face. Maybe that was the reason I now love you so much—because I wasn't certain of you. Do you remember the night we had the fight at the Starret ranch house dance?"

"I'd forgotten all about it," he confessed.

"I haven't! You were making up to one of those nester girls when I called your hand. Kissing her out under the trees. I slapped your face good and hard. And what did you do?"

That one had him baffled. He could almost feel the sweat beginning to ooze out from under the open collar of his shirt.

"Well..." he said hesitatingly. "I guess I took appropriate action."

"You bet you did! You slapped me right back. But I guess I loved it, because Dad says I'm as high spirited as one of his Morgans. I love you very much, Joe. I've told you so many times. But there are two things we must understand tonight before you go. You've got to make good like Dad says. You've got to make good, not to him, but to me. And if you tear out Mary's heart like you almost tore mine out, I swear on this spot that I'll marry Harry Seltzer. Heaven knows he's asked me plenty of times."

CHAPTER VII

HE BEGAN to quarrel with her. He did it deliberately because he knew his twin brother Joe and how Joe would have reacted. He did it, too, because he couldn't stand to have her near him, her frankly spoken love, the deceit of the thing. He felt rotten taking Joe's place, a perfect stranger insofar as she was concerned. It was neither right nor honorable to let her believe he was Joe.

And the thing ended about the way he thought it would. She stood before him in the night, and the darkness was not necessary to see her blazing eyes. Her hand flashed up and slashed across his cheeks, first one and then the other, in resounding blows.

My God, he thought, I've got to slap a woman!

"Get out!" she hissed at him. "Get on up to that line camp where you belong. You're no good. You never were no good. I've loved you like no woman ever loved a man. But deep down inside you, you're no good. So get out...up to the line camp and stay there. I'm going to marry Harry the next time he asks me."

It took courage, but he did it. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. He didn't slap her. That he couldn't do. "On the day that you marry him, you'll have a dead bridegroom on your hands," he said with simulated harshness. "I'll blow off the top of his head while the minister is performing the ceremony."

He turned on his heel and left her, striding away through the night. He wondered if these quarrels between two people in love were the usual thing. He thought, none of this love business for me.

He strode into the bunkhouse where riders lounged around on their bunks and some played penny ante poker and dominoes. Greetings rose in chorus. He nodded curtly to them and went to his bunk. The air seemed to be stifling. He wanted to get out as quickly as possible.

He hauled up the warbag from under the bunk, then reached for his rifle.

"Hey, Joe, where you goin' all of a sudden?" a lanky rider demanded.

"Same old job," Jay answered carelessly. "The old man says I'd better get on up to the line camp tonight so's I can give Turk a hand first thing in the mornin'."

"He et supper with the boss and the easterners in the house," jeered a voice.

"He'll be our boss one of these days," came another.

"Joe, you agoin' to raise our wages when you marry Ellen?" asked a third.

It was good natured gibing and he knew it. He grunted a few replies, said a so-long, boys, and went out into the night with his warbag and rifle. He dumped them down beside the corral gate, went to the shed and retrieved his riding gear from the pole, came back and went into the corral, rope in hand. He didn't know which horses were fresh and which had worked through the day and, later, would be turned out to night pasture after a grain feed from the trough. He saw a blocky outline in the night and let his loop spin out. It caught the ducking horse and he pulled it up close.

MINUTES LATER, he led the saddled animal to where his gear was piled on the ground, slid the rifle into its saddle boot, and tied on the warbag back of the cantle.

Then he saw the white outlines of her dress as she came close. She put both arms around his neck.

"Oh, Joe, Joe!" she whispered. "How much I love you. You haven't changed a bit."

He took her into his arms and kissed her hard, almost brutally, and this time there was no acting. Holy Mother, he thought, I'm falling in love with my brother's girl!

He had to get out of there fast and he knew it. He laughed. "Of course you do, honey, and I love you. You didn't mean a word about me being no good, did you?"

"Not a word of it. It's just that you ...you make me so angry sometimes. I think you do it on purpose to make me quarrel with you. Now, get out of here and don't you come back until you make good."

"I'm half way there already, me beloved," he grinned and swung up.

He jogged down the lane between the two rows of trees. He left the ranch behind and then saw the lounging figure of the rider sitting his horse beside the barbed wire fence. One of the night guards for the Morgans in the pasture. The other was probably over on the other side.

No doubt about it: If Brad Morden was to get at that blooded stock, he'd have his hands full.

A well beaten trail showed a white streak in the night and he took it, riding due north. Joe had outlined the country and he rode on, sure of finding the line camp, but with his rifle across his saddle. He hadn't forgotten the man who had tried to shoot him the night before.

He'd ride for a half mile, then pull up to listen. Every mile he'd swing down and put his ear to the ground. A night hawk whistled by, low overhead, on the hunt for rabbits and mice, and from a distant knoll came the yap of a coyote. Here and there he saw bedded down cattle, dark blobs in the night. The stars were out, clear and cold, far, far away in the infinite space, and in the smell of the gentle night breeze, he thought he caught the faint whiff of her perfume again. Joe was a lucky man. Women like Ellen Randall, with her beauty and her frankness, didn't come along every day.

No clinging wall flower, this well

educated ranch girl. She knew what she wanted—Joe—and she was frank enough to let "him" know it, now that he was back.

"It was still a dirty trick to kiss her," muttered Jay, and paused to listen once more.

The miles slipped past and the swale rose a little as it narrowed and finally petered out on top of a rolling flat plain. That would put him about seven miles from the ranch, according to Joe's directions. Far in the night he saw a dark horizon, much higher, and knew it was Old Sandstone. Old Sandstone was a high ridge about a mile in length, red during the day, and without vegetation. It was about eight miles away, and at its west butte lay the line camp.

JAY MADE the trip in a little over three hours. He saw the height of Old Sandstone loom up closer until he could see the serrated back with a hump in the middle, and he swung left, dropping down into a grassy bottom. He crossed over and came out onto the plain again for another half mile. Then, when he had almost ridden by, he caught the outlines of a big cabin made of sandstone and mortar and a small corral. The place was dark and he guessed that Turk Pennock, after a hard day in the saddle, was sound asleep.

Jay rode up to the corral and swung down, opening the gate and leading his horse inside. Four other horses dozed sleepily at the opposite side. He untied his warbag and then unsaddled, turning loose the mount he had ridden from the ranch. He threw his saddle over the fence and clumped toward the cabin, warbag over one shoulder. This was Randall's northmost line camp, fifteen miles from the ranch. The ranch sat squarely in a tract of land sixty miles square, its "fence" consisting of a string of line camps around the boundary of the two hundred and forty miles holding.

The rock cabin looked comfortable and roomy from the outside; and strong enough to withstand a rifle siege, if there was water inside.

Jay dumped his gear down outside the door, which was open, making plenty of noise as he did so. From within came the roll of a body in a bunk and a sharp metallic click.

"Who is it?" rapped out a voice from the darkness.

"Jay..." Damn it, he thought bitterly. Now I've done it!

"Who? Stand fast and talk!"

"Joe, you fool. I just got in," snorted the bogus Joe.

"Holy smokes! I'm shore glad to have company again." A bunk creaked again and footsteps padded in the darkness. A match flared, and Turk Pennock put the lamp globe back on and turned.

He was a big, red faced man of around thirty-five with the countenance of a good-natured thief who wouldn't hesitate to steal if there was money in it for him. He was in sock feet and heavy underdrawers—to prevent saddle chafe—but naked from the waist up, his chest a matt of golden hair. He put down the six shooter beside the lamp and came over to thrust out a hand. His grin showed two teeth missing from the lower row, possibly where a fist had landed.

"You danged ol' woman chasin' hoot owl," he chuckled delightedly. "I'm sure glad to see you back. It's been plenty lonesome since you left. Where you been? Workin' down at the home place so's to be near Randall's gal?"

It was obvious that he knew nothing about Joe getting shot. Only the men who had been in on the attempted raid the night Morden's men hit the ranch, knew; and they were all in New Mexico or Oklahoma territory by now.

"I had to go down home to see the

folks," Jay said. He retrieved his warbag from outside and placed it on the dirt floor beside his bunk There were only two in the cabin. Pennock had pulled a bottle of whiskey from under his own bunk and now extended it.

"Have one, Joe," he offered. "Best stuff in Brad's store. Man, am I glad to see you. It's been lonesome up here with me waitin' day after day fer you to come back. Say...how'd that raid come out on the ranch?"

Jay shook his head, and laughed at the look of surprise on the other's face. "Nope. No more, Turk. The old man laid down the law about Ellen. No more drinking and all that stuff. I got to walk the chalk line from now on."

"Haw-haw-haw!" laughed the red faced rider, and tilted the bottle. He wiped his lips on his hairy left arm and grinned. "That's a good 'un, that is, Joe. But what about thet raid you helped out on?"

JAY WAS removing gunbelt and chaps. "It didn't work," he said, busy with buckles along his left leg. "The old man had guards out around the horse pasture, and they was well armed from the way they let loose. One of the boys got shot. Don't know who."

He told of Swinnerton riding out from town with him, and of the attempted ambush in the night. Pennock looked thoughtful.

"Peg Smith?" he finally queried.

"I don't know," Jay said. "He trailed us all the way from the ranch, I think. He was sore at me for busting his head with a gun barrel last spring, and the old man warned me to watch out for him."

Turk Pennock's big red face grew dark. "Most likely was. I've caught sight of a strange rider a coupla times on the skyline. Chased him two miles one day. It looked like Smith. I ketch him hanging around here and it won't be a gun barrel that'll crease his skull. It'll be a slug of lead. I never liked him, anyhow. I was over to Antelope Creek night before last—thet's where I got this bottle of liquor—and I seen him sneakin' around, mean-eyed as ever. What do you reckon his game is, anyhow?"

Jay had relieved himself of his chaps, and now he shrugged. "I dunno. What do you think?"

"No tellin'. Brad don't like strangers in his main camp unless he knows who they are an' what they're doin'. Maybe Peg is workin' fer him an' Jim Swinnerton.

"Well," grunted Jay, "he won't be workin' for anybody if he makes another play like I thought he made. That's a fact."

"You had anything to eat? I got some cold stew and beans left."

"I had supper at the ranch with the folks. They brought out some easterners today. Friends of Ellen. There's a gal that ain't hard to look at."

Pennock laughed uproariously. "You ol' hound dog! Come on...let's get to bed. We've got a lot of strange stuff on our range, and they piled up since you left. I rode the west wing one day an' the east wing the next day, but they still kept driftin' over on us. When's Brad goin' to make a second try for them Morgans?"

"I don't know," Jay answered honestly. "They've got a pretty good haul on the way across the state line into the territory. He said he'd be back in a couple of weeks or so."

He finished undressing and laid back the blankets of Joe's bunk. Turk Pennock blew out the lamp and padded across the floor in his sock feet. His straw bunk rustled as he settled himself on top of his blankets. The whiskey bottle gurgled once and presently he began to snore.

Jay lay there in his bunk and stared

up into the darkness, thinking of the job he had taken on, of Brad Morden and Jim Swinnerton, of Joe lying wounded in that crude cabin...and of Ellen Randall. He turned in his bunk, half angrily, and let sleep finally find him.

THEY AROSE just before sunup. Jay built a fire in the kitchen stove in the second room and began looking around for something to cook for breakfast. Pennock disappeared with a water pail toward the "bottom" below, then returned. While Jay cooked flapjacks and bacon, the other man led the horses down into the bottom again, watered them, brought them back and fed them grain.

They ate breakfast, swallowed down the last cup of scalding black coffee, and fixed up two packages of lunch consisting of bacon strips between biscuits and dried beef jerky and a small can of peaches. Pennock tied a bit of coffee in a sack made from white cloth and Jay did the same. He presumed that somewhere out along the patrol line there was a coffee pot waiting.

He purposely waited until the other man mounted first, not knowing whether Turk had the east or west patrol. Pennock swung up and headed east with a wave of his hand. Jay turned west, following a well worn trail made by many other riders before him, including his brother Joe.

This line riding was a bit new to him, but he deviated from the trail every time he saw cattle, studying the brands. He drove back thirty or forty strays that morning, pushing them northward over onto their own boundaries. At noon, he followed the trail into a group of hackberry trees and saw the blackened coffee pot by the ashes of many fires.

Here was where his brother had his noon meal each day. He watered his horse from the tepid "lake" under the hackberries, staked it out to graze, and fixed dinner. By the time he rode back that afternoon, he had met the rider from the next line camp, lounged briefly in the saddle while he talked with the man who thought he was Joe, and knew the general lay of the country.

He fell into line camp life with ease and a certain familiarity born of his life in the Texas cow country. Once or twice he made slight slip-ups that caused Turk to shoot him questioning glances, but on the whole he had no worries. Not until the second afternoon, when he spotted the strange rider. The man was about a mile away and Jay loped toward him, thinking him one of the riders from the outfits to the north, looking for drifters. But to his surprise, the man wheeled his horse and disappeared at a gallop into a forest of green mesquite.

On the third day, he finished his patrol early and came in about two hours before sundown. To his surprise, Pennock was already in, his horse unsaddled in the corral. Jay released his sweaty mount and clanked over to the cabin.

Turk Pennock was shaving, already dressed in his Sunday clothes. "I was wonderin' if you'd fergot," he chuckled. "Hurry up an' git dressed. It's our night to howl. We'll bust the place open an' then sleep late in the mornin'. Randall's supply man won't be here with the wagon fer another week yet an' there's no danger of us bein' ketched."

Jay didn't know what it was all about, but he went to his bunk and shed his clothes, drawing out a pair of new pants and clean shirt from his warbag. He shaved from the last of the hot water...and waited. He was hungry and wanted to get supper going.

Pennock was fully dressed now. He said, with a grin, "Come on, let's

saddle an' get goin'. We can make it in' a little over two hours."

They saddled fresh horses and rode out. The sun was still an hour in the sky. They rounded the west end of the high mountain, Old Sandstone's serrated hump gleaming red in the afternoon sun, and set off at a fast jog trot. They were heading north and a little west, and Jay let the other man set the pace.

It was shortly after the late summer darkness had set in that they dropped down a slope and Jay saw lights ahead, plus the gleam of water in a wide belt of sand.

"Antelope Creek!" came Turk's laughing voice in the darkness. "Now for the whiskey an' them wimmin. Brad knows what it takes to keep his hoss thieves happy."

CHAPTER VIII

THEY CLATTERED down the slope and walked their horses through the deep sand, letting them pause to drink from one of the shallow water holes. No doubt about it, this country needed rain. They splashed on across into more sand and ascended to higher ground where Jay saw the dark outlines of possibly a dozen crude shacks and at least fifteen corrals further out on the prairie. The horse raider must have been pretty sure of his strength or cunning to have such a big camp within thirty or forty miles of a big ranch.

"That big low building over there with the lights shinin' on the porch is Brad's ace in the hole, in case he ever quits stealin' horses, he told me," Pennock grinned. "I told him a lot of good it'd do him with a rope stretchin' his neck."

They rode up and swung down. Doors and windows were open, and Jay saw the lighted interior had a few shelves loaded with supplies on one side and a rough bar on the other side. A dozen or so riders lounged about both on the porch and inside, and from somewhere in the night came a man's voice followed by a feminine giggle.

"'Lo, boys," Pennock greeted as they mounted the porch. "Look who I got with me."

Jay froze inside again. If some of the men who had been in the other camp happened to be present and knew that there were two Allisons instead of one, it would be just a matter of time until the word leaked out and spread around the country. You just couldn't keep secret something as unusual as that.

"Hi, Joe," greeted several men, though there was something curious, something strained in their looks, and Jay should have known that word of Joe getting shot in the raid on Randall's Morgans was bound to spread. He'd just have to let things go and see what happened.

They went inside and Pennock bellied up to the bar. A pretty, dark faced, dark-eyed girl who was either half or full blooded Mexican came over and looked up with a bright glance.

"So? You have come back at last?" she asked, and he caught the faint trace of an accent in her voice. Her mother probably had been Mexican, her father some rider of the outlands.

"Yep, he's come back, Lucia," chuckled Turk Pennock, turning, glass in hand. "But it won't do you any good this time, either. He won't drink an' he won't cuss, an' I think he hates to smoke anymore. Old Man Randall laid down the law to him plenty."

"Who is this old man Randall?" she demanded.

Jay hesitated and Pennock, with a guffaw, replied for him: "Shucks, Lucia, didn't he ever tell you as how he's goin' to marry Randall's ranch

one of these days? That gal over there—"

"Cut it out, Turk, what do you say?" Jay cut in lazily, with a certain warning in his voice. "Let's leave her out of it."

"So?" Lucia demanded. "I let you kiss me an' now you have another girl all the time."

Jay squirmed at the laughter of several men, but was glad when she flounced over and leaned beside Turk.

"That's all right, honey," he drawled, and slid an arm around her waist. "I'll kiss you anytime, and I ain't got no other girl."

SHE TWISTED her lithe body from his encircling arm and her eyes flashed at Jay, her words for Turk Pennock. "Nobody but Joe ever has kissed me. I am not the common camp girl."

"Of course you ain't. You dance with us but you won't make love. Well, honey, anytime you change yore mind, pappy is ready to do what's right by little Lucia."

A lithe, dark-faced man, a Mexican rider, moved in, wariness in every movement of his body. "Lucia, she is my girl," he said in slow, precise English. "You keep away from her, Joe. You unnerstand?"

"Take it easy, Miguel," grinned Turk. "All you Rio Mexes think that you got to do is look at one of these northern Mexican-American gals an' they flop over in a dead faint."

"I am no man's girl," she half hissed at the three of them. "My father is an American and I was born here."

"You are my girl," the border Mexican insisted. "Someday I take you with me to Mejico."

"Her paw might hev somethin' to say about thet," grinned Turk good humoredly. There was contempt in his eyes for the Mexican raider. "An' Belden thinks a lot of her even if he is a hoss thief ridin' fer Brad. An' it's a good thing fer you, Miguel, thet he's on thet big drive over into the territories with Brad. He catches a greaser from across the line foolin' with Lucia an'—"

Something like a snarl broke from the Mexican rider's lips at the word "greaser", the greatest insult you could utter to a Mexican. His hand flashed to his hip and started up, but Jay was standing beside him and his hand flashed down, holding the gun in its sheath.

"Turn loose!" snarled Miguel. "I keel you, I keel both of you now!"

Rage had changed his precise English. He was snarling like a cat, his dark, handsome face contorted. But Jay's fast action had given Turk and the others time to move. Three men were on the Mexican raider in a flash. They held him while he struggled and cursed in Spanish. One of them slipped the gun from its sheath, laughing, and handed it over to the man back of the crude eight foot bar.

"Here, Limpy, put this back there 'til Miguel cools off. Come on, boys, cut it out. You know Brad's orders about fightin' amongst ourselves in camp. Cool down, Mig. Joe an' Turk don't want yore girl."

"I am not his girl," snapped Lucia's voice. She stood, slim and willowy, head back, her eyes flashing. She was unperturbed, even though the trouble had been over her.

They released the Mexican rider. His face was a shade paler beneath its swarthy exterior, his eyes bright. He had regained his composure.

"Someday I kill you for this, Joe," he said quietly.

"Aw, fergit it, Mig," Turk said good humoredly. "It was a dirty trick, trying to make a sneak try to throw a gun on me when my back was half turned. If it hadn't been for Joe here, I'da been stretched out on the floor here an' you'da either had yore neck stretched by the boys or been

bustin' the breeze south for the border. You know Brad would have kicked you outa the gang."

HE TURNED to Joe, the matter now past. "If you ever git in a jam, Joe, an' need a friend, you won't have to send word more than once to Turk Pennock."

"I, too, do not forget," the Mexican *vaquero* said with a significance in the words that left no doubt as to his meaning. If he ever got the chance, there would be a shoot-out between "Joe" Allison and himself.

Jay turned to the bar and ordered a small beer. He heard footsteps beside him and looked into the face of Jim Swinnerton. The lawyer was smiling.

"That was a nice bit of work, but you've made an enemy. I was coming through the back door, but couldn't get here in time to stop it. Turk is right. We don't allow that kind of thing here in camp. So watch your step...Joe. That makes two enemies you've got here now," this last in a very low voice. "Peg Smith is here."

"Yes?" Jay answered in an equally low voice, inaudible above the hum of conversation in the room.

"Maybe we'd better take a walk. Your brother is here, too. Hank brought him in on a travois. My orders."

Jay downed the beer, leaving part of it in the glass, and moved off with the lawyer. "Don't let him bat yore ears down fer bein' away so long, Joe," calling a grinning thief.

They went out into the night, past the porch, toward more cabins scattered around here and there.

"So that's why one or two of the men were giving me queer looks," Jay said. "I guess the fat's in the fire now. It'll be just a matter of time until Mike Randall finds out. You just can't keep anything like that quiet. I'm afraid Joe's in for trouble."

"Not necessarily," was the reply. "First of all, I spread the word around that you only got nicked in that fracas at Randall's ranch, not shot up bad like the boys first reported. Second, Hank slipped Joe in here after everybody was in bed last night. Again, my orders. He's in my own cabin and none of the men ever dare to enter it. They always stop at the door."

"How is he?"

"A little better, but still a sick boy. That long ride dragged behind a horse didn't help things a bit. It busted open the wound in back and he bled a little, but not much. He's just stiff and sore, that's all. We'll keep him hid out of sight and my Mexican housekeeper will take care of him. She don't talk and neither will Hank. By the time Brad and the boys get back from the territory, I'll get to them and they won't talk either. The less who know about it, the better. So I think you're reasonably safe."

"What's Peg Smith doing here in camp? Turk said you don't welcome strangers."

Swinnerton laughed softly in the night. They passed a cabin and a dog began to bark. The lawyer bent, picked up a stick, and the cur went yelping around the corner to continue its bawls from the safety of the back of the house.

"Since you're in with us, Peg is no stranger. He works for us. But he's on Mike's payroll as a sort of scout to keep an eye out for horsetracks that the line riders miss and—well, you might as well have it. Mike's a little suspicious about you for some reason and Peg's keeping an eye on you, too, with orders to make reports to the ranch."

JAY GRUNTED. They were approaching a large, two room cabin built of red sandstone up from the

creek. "He's doing a good job, all right. I saw him a couple of days ago snooping around on my run west of Old Sandstone. I'm pretty sure it was him. But when I went after him, he burned the breeze over a ridge and out of sight. I still think it was him took a shot at us that night."

"At you, not at us," Swinnerton chuckled. "He admitted it this afternoon when I accused him of it. He says that orders or no orders from Mike, as well as myself, he's going to square up for that whack over the head. I threatened him, but Peg is a dangerous man, Jay, and he's not afraid of the devil himself. That includes Mike as well as Brad. So you watch out for him."

"I intend to," Jay replied.

They had approached the front door of the rock cabin, which was closed. Swinnerton opened it and Jay followed him into a comfortable living room. There were rugs of dried calf skin on the floor, chairs of willow frame stretched over with dried rawhide hard as iron but comfortable, and a few books on a shelf. In one corner was a comfortable bunk.

"My housekeeper usually sleeps in the other room, but Joe has her bed," the lawyer explained. "She'll sleep in the front room when I'm not here so's to be able to look after Joe. You've nothing to worry about, boy," this last in a good-fellow tone of voice.

Brother, Jay Allison thought, I've got plenty to worry about!

A middle aged Mexican woman appeared in the doorway leading to the next room. She looked at Jay, her eyes widened, and she froze in sheer astonishment.

"*Madre de Dios!*" she exclaimed. "It is...it is the ghost."

"No, Mrs. Sanchez, it's not a ghost," Swinnerton laughed. "It is the twin brother to the wounded one. A secret that you must keep. How is he?"

She stepped aside and beckoned. Jay followed the lawyer into the second room that was part kitchen. Joe lay on a clean bed between sheets. He was freshly bandaged, shaved, and was propped up high on pillows, reading a book.

He put the book down on top of the sheet and grinned. Jay was relieved at sight of him. He was still a badly shot up man, but looking far different than he had the other time.

"How are you feeling, Joe?" he asked.

"A little tired and sore from that long haul on the travois, but Hank took it slow and let me rest. Mrs. Sanchez fed me and gave me something to make me sleep awhile. I'll be up and around in no time. How's things at the ranch?"

Jay sat down and told him everything in detail, feeling himself get a little red in the face as he related his parting with Ellen, after the quarrel.

Joe Allison let out a laugh. "She's strictly a one man woman, that sweetheart of mine. You say she's got a real pretty friend? Must be tough on you, having to stay away from the ranch. Hot dog!"

"I'm very happy about it," Jay grunted, and meant it. "You can have your women. I'll ride solo."

"That grinning jackass don't know what he's missing, Jim," Joe said to Swinnerton. "That's what I thought, too, 'til I met Ellen. Then the world busted wide open an' love come floodin' down. Just you wait...he'll get hit the same way sometime."

JAY CHANGED the subject. "You'd better try to write mom a letter with that good hand when you're able. I forgot to give you her letters the other night. Ellen was plenty suspicious about you getting three let-

ters from home when you were supposed to be there. Said she'd bet you wasn't at home at all, probably chasing after some girl."

"Good. That'll keep her guessing and on edge and take her mind off this handsome Harry fellow 'til I can ride again. How's things up at the line camp? Turk suspicion anything about you not being me?"

Jay shook his head. "I lived too long around you not to know how you think and act. We're getting along all right, riding the line and pushing CJ drifters back to where their own line men can pick 'em up."

"Turk's a good man, even if he is a horse thief," Joe Allison answered seriously. "He'll come through in a pinch."

"It's you I'm interested in having come through in a pinch, Joe," his twin answered a little coolly. "We've got to have an understanding now. I'm sticking out my neck to help get you out of this mess. There was a gent even took a shot at me the other night, thinking it was you."

"Peg Smith, eh? I'd bet a hundred on it. Well, just you wait until I get on my feet and get my gun arm again. Took a shot at my brother, eh? I'm going to kill him if it's the last thing I ever do, you wait and see."

Jay rose. "You'll do no such damned fool thing. Aren't you in enough of a mess as it is? Smith is on Mike Randall's payroll as a scout for horse thieves, and to keep a check-up on me. You kill him and Randall will forbid you a foot on the ranch. You get that idea right out of your head, Joe, and I mean it. You're going to come through like you promised. You make one false step and you and I are through from now on. It's different trails for us. I mean that, too!"

"Cut out the lecture, professor," chuckled Joe. "You just stick to line riding until I get back into a saddle, then watch my smoke. Jim here told me tonight that when I'm well again we'll all call it quits and nobody will talk. That's the way it's going to be."

They talked on for a few minutes and then Mrs. Sanchez, the bosomly Mexican housekeeper, moved into the room.

"Enough," she said. "He will sleep now. I turn out the light."

Jay bid him goodbye and went out into the night again, Swinnerton walking beside him. They were silent for a moment, the hard hatred coming up into Jay toward the man who had lied to Joe.

"Maybe it was best to let him think that," Jay finally said. "He'll get well a whole lot quicker thinking that everything is all right. But it was a dirty trick just the same."

"Nothing to worry about," the lawyer replied offhandedly. "When you shoot big as I'm shooting, you can't be too scrupulous. Joe stays here a prisoner until he gets well and we get those Randall Morgans. Then we'll figure out something."

"Yeah," Jay said quietly. "We'll figure out something."

They passed the cabins again and the dog began to bawl, but remained out of sight back of the cabin. From somewhere nearby, a horse stomped. Angry voices came from a small cabin, a man quarrelling with his woman, and new sounds came from the bigger building they had left. A fiddle was scraping and Jay saw two or three couples on the floor. Turk was waltzing with Lucia, the glowering Miguel leaning his back against the front wall by the door. His gun sheath was still empty.

Jay, however, had eyes only for one man.

At the bar, gulping a big shot of whiskey, stood the angular form of Peg Smith.

CHAPTER IX

SMITH WAS leaning his long frame against the bar, downing his fourth straight oversized shot of whiskey. He always drank that way, and he boasted of it when he was among men; that liquor didn't make him stagger or thicken his tongue or slow his gun hand. When alone, he drank the same way, and brooded.

For Peg Smith was a frustrated man, hating the vissitudes of life that made him a man hunter, a bounty collector, or what he liked to call "an exterminator".

In the backwash of the Civil War, from which he had deserted after two months, he drifted out of Missouri and over into the state of Kansas, where feeling was still of the bitterest. He drifted into Abilene to drink and try his luck at the gaming tables as a tinhorn gambler. But something in his brooding mind made him unfitted for the job of cleaning the trail drive punchers. He drank too much at the table, shot a man or two in brawls, and was advised by the law that his presence would be welcome elsewhere.

He left the state behind, riding a stolen horse, and worked his way westward into the wild Wyoming territory country, still frustrated at his inability to make a quick pile and buy himself a ranch and live like the gentleman he then fancied himself to be.

It was quite by accident that he fell into his new calling as "exterminator." He was in a saloon in Cheyenne one day, spending his last few dollars for drinks at the bar, quarrelsome and boasting of his war days, his fights, his shooting sprees. The knife he carried at his belt, in addition to his pistol, claimed to have lifted eighteen Comanche scalps.

At a nearby table, two men sat talking. One was a lean, distinguished looking rancher dressed in a business suit. He was bony faced, bushy browed, and had a pair of piercing blue eyes above a flowing white mustache. This was Elkins, mighty cattle baron and king of his own domain. The other man, too, was a rancher, though where Elkins was lean and thin and bony of face, the other was big, red faced, massive and shoddily dressed. His range abutted Elkins' on the west and he numbered his cattle by the thousands. This was Bert Travis, another king of his own mighty domain.

Smith sat running a thumb along the edge of his knife, a favorite past time of his when drinking and boasting. It was his one ticket to respect among men, or so he believed.

"Just let any man get tough with me," he would say. "Just let him think he's got guts. Well, all he's got to do to prove it is take another knife and grab hold of one corner of my bandana, and, b'God, we'll see who can hang on the longest."

Only one man, a half drunk cow puncher, had ever accepted the offer, and Peg Smith had killed him. "I hung his hide right on a peg," he never failed to say.

But Smith wasn't boasting now. He sat quietly, testing the blade with a thumb, listening to the two men. Travis, the burly one, was speaking. "We're got to take action now, Harry," he was saying in a low voice, pounding the table for emphasis. "They're stealing us blind. Workin' amongst themselves and lyin' for each other. Never saw a damned nester yet who wouldn't steal a cow if he got a chance. And they're settling all over what you know and I know is our range. If we don't put a stop to it now, we're going under, you

mark what I tell you. Rawlins is the leader. He ain't a nester anymore. He's a small time cowman now. On our cows and on our ranges. So I say, do something about it. Now!"

Elkins low reply was inaudible to Peg Smith.

SMITH SHEATHED the big knife and rose. He walked over to the table and bent down, stroking his long mustache, the whiskey strong on his breath. "Gentlemen," he said, affecting the role of one. "My name is Peg Smith. Ever hear of me."

Elkins looked up, a frown of annoyance on his bony face. "Can't say that I have," he said curtly.

"Then you ain't been around much. I—"

"What do you want?"

"A job."

"My foreman and ranger boss, Jack Curtis, is in town. See him," was the reply, and Elkins turned to the other rancher again.

"I didn't say anything about goin' to work fer him. I'm astin' you fer a job. I been listenin' to you gennlemen talk. I don't like nesters either."

Elkins' piercing eyes looked him over, the unshaved face with its long mustache, the worn clothes on the verge of seediness, smelled the raw whiskey on his breath.

"Not interested," he said curtly. "And now, will you leave us, please?"

Smith straightened, hot blood flowing through his face, the blood of rage and frustration. So this damned old block of ice thought he was high and mighty, did he?

"All right, if that's the way you feel about it," he said stiffly, and swaggered over to the bar. "Gimme another drink," he ordered. "And send the two gennlemen one. From Peg Smith, exterminator."

He paid out all of his money except one dollar for the drinks, gulped his, and swaggered out.

It was by chance that he was down at the wagon yard two hours later when Travis rode up. Smith walked over, a little belligerent this time, for he remembered the rebuff.

"Talk to you a minute?" he grunted sourly at the bigger man.

"I'm in a hurry. Make it short," Travis snapped.

He walked over by a shed and Peg Smith faced him. "I don't like yore friend Elkins worth a damn, he thinks he's so high and mighty. But you ain't like him. If you never heard of Peg Smith, then you never spent much time in Missouri and Kansas. I'm purty well known up there fer doin' the kind of a job most men ain't got nerve enough to do, such as gettin' rid of cow thieves. I put four of them outa the way for one outfit and I didn't talk. Gimme thirty days time an' grub, plus two hundred cash, and this Rawlins won't rustle any more of yore cattle."

Travis eyed him narrowly. "That's pretty plain talk, mister."

"I'm a plain talkin' man, when there's somethin' to say. The rest of the time I don't talk. I'll need two fast hosses, one staked out fifty miles away. When they find a man I've exterminated," he liked that word, "I'll be one hundred miles away to establish a alibi."

TRAVIS WAS still a little dubious, but he had told Elkins they had to have action now. He took the gamble. Two weeks later, Peg Smith was camped out at a spring, his extra horse away in a small, newly built brush corral by another spring.

It took him two weeks of patient

stalking until he got his man five miles from his homestead and shot him with a rifle. Rawlins wasn't quite dead when Smith rode up. He swing down and used his pistol to finish off the dying man with a bullet square through the face. He made his hundred mile run, loafed in town for a week, went back and got his second, and then third man. By now, the country was in an uproar. All three had been shot from ambush and then shot through the face, trademark of a hired killer. Smith loafed in one town or another, spent his money on whiskey, quarrelled and boastingly hinted that more rustlers were to get the same thing. He revelled in the company of such men as Elkins, who now accepted him for, no matter his boasts, Smith never revealed the name of his employers.

Then, he killed his fourth man in a particularly brutal murder, and talked a little too much. The settlers, though rustling cattle, now knew for certain who the "exterminator" was and who had hired him. With an open cattle war on their hands, Elkins and Travis curtly dismissed him, advising him that his presence was unhealthy for them, and that it would be unhealthy for him if he remained on their ranges. He had talked too much whiskey talk.

That was why he had ended up in Texas, frustrated and enraged more than ever over the injustice the cattlemen had done him; offering his services to Mike Randall and other cattlemen, who had curtly refused. Randall, however, had hired him to look for tracks and to keep an eye on Joe Allison's escapades. Part of Smith's new job was to spy on the line cabin and see if there was any drinking going on in it.

It hadn't taken him long to locate the horse thief camp on the creek and to establish connections with Brad Morden. Thus, Peg Smith covered the range between the ranch, where he spied to see if there were guards over the Morgans, and the vicinity of the line camp, and on to the settlement. He had a score to settle with Joe Allison because of one night in Ashbury, when Smith was drunk and boasting, and he had offered to do the knife and bandana routine with any man who had guts enough, Joe, a little disgusted, had called his hand. When Smith tried a double-cross and flashed his hand to his gun, Joe had blocked the draw with his left hand and laid the exterminator's scalp open with the six inch barrel of his own gun.

Thus it came about that the night of the raid on the Morgans, Peg Smith lay close by with a Winchester in his hands. When the shooting began, he rode in close and shot the puncher out of the saddle.

He knew it was Joe. Of that there could be no doubt. And he knew from the manner Joe toppled out of the saddle from the smashing blow of the bullet, that he was badly hit.

That was why Peg Smith had stared so coldly in the hotel lobby that night. Joe, apparently without a scratch, walking through with Randall. He was puzzled; he simply couldn't believe it. *He had shot Joe Allison!* He'd burned the breeze to Antelope Creek to find Brad and get some information. But Brad wasn't around and Smith began a detailed watch of the line camp. Day after day, he saw Turk riding alone. Between times, he rode up as close as he dared, removed his boots, and walked in to explore the cabin without leaving tracks. The bunk and cooking utensils were for one man, the unwashed dishes plainly showing that.

SO NOW Joe Allison was showing up again tonight with Swinnerton.

Peg Smith, with just enough liquor down him to make him dangerously belligerent, was going to find out why.

He put down his glass, nodded for Limpy to refill it again, and looked at the two men. Limpy, an ex-cow puncher crippled for life when a horse had rolled down a bank with him, poured. Smith looked, the puzzle in his brain growing. The scrape of the fiddle grated on his ears, as did the laughter of the dancers.

When the music stopped, Turk came over with Lucia, several more drinks to the good. He was enjoying the discomfiture of the scowling Miguel. He saw Smith eyeing Jay, sneered openly, and half turned his back.

Turk didn't like Peg Smith, had never liked him. Pennock was a plain thief, and the boasting Smith had done about his exploits went against the grain of this plain, honest stealer of horses.

"Gimme a drink, Limpy," he ordered. "I got to clean out my ears. We're agoin' to hear some loud talk."

Peg Smith ignored the insult and moved toward Swinnerton and Jay Allison. He hauled up and nodded, his eyes on Jay. "You look purty good fer a man who's been on vacation," he remarked.

"I feel all right," Jay said.

"Things all right at the ranch?"

"So I heard."

"You didn't hev much luck givin' the boys a hand with them hosses. Maybe the shootin' unnerved you 'til you had to go home to settle yore nerves a bit."

"Cut it out, Peg," Swinnerton ordered sharply. "I'm runnin' this outfit and there'll be no picked fights."

"You ain't runnin' me now nor any other time. I ain't aimin' to pick a fight. I just want to ask a few questions."

"You won't ask them in here. I said for you to cut it out and I mean just that."

It had gotten quiet in the room, as it always does when trouble is impending. The fiddler sat silently, his bow upright. He carefully laid it and the violin down and got out of his chair. The eyes of the Mexican, Miguel, had lost their scowl and were slumberous, waiting.

"No doubt about it," Jay Allison answered quietly, "I've got good reason to have bad nerves. That night of the raid, a man took a pot shot at me and nicked my shoulder. Then, the other night, another man took a pot shot at me and almost did it again. Then he showed up a third time and ducked out of sight when he saw me. I came in from the line the other day and found my warbag ransacked. I expect I'll be a nervous wreck one of these days if that fellow keeps on snooping around."

Smith's face flushed. "You hintin' anything?" he demanded.

"I'm just telling you that you're a four flushing back shooter who shoots from ambush and then goes around boasting about it. A yellow bellied cur dog."

SWINNERTON started to move in between them, never had time to make it. He half recoiled as Peg Smith's right hand flashed to his hip and Jay's went down simultaneously. Jay had stepped forward as he drew, and his left hand flicked out. For the second time, a gun barrel flashed high and gave off a thudding sound as it struck a crumpled hat. The hook hammer cut through, and when the exterminator crashed to the floor and his hat fell away, a small crimson trickle stained the shaggy blonde hair, gathered weight, and cut a course down the side of his face past an ear.

Jay stepped back, sheathing the pistol. "Some men," he said in a cold, flat voice, "just don't ever learn. When he comes to, tell him that if he ever makes trouble again, I'll kill him."

He was surprised then to see Turk, gun in hand. Turk said, "Shaw," and sheathed the big pistol. "Boy, if you keep on hittin' him over the noggin with thet gun, you're just naturally agoin' to wear out the barrel an' hev to buy a new gun," he guffawed.

Swinnerton bent over the unconscious man. "Here, you men, give me a hand," he ordered. "Lift him to the bar."

They hauled Peg Smith's lax figure over to his whiskey glass. Swinnerton poured a bit into the bleeding cut made by the hook hammer and the exterminator groaned. He opened his eyes, half fell over the bar, and struggled to straighten.

"Wha—" he began.

"Shut up and drink this," snapped Swinnerton, holding out the glass. "You were looking for trouble. You found it. Joe should have shot you dead. You drink this and get out of this camp."

"I wouldn't do it," Jay's voice said. "He's a vindictive man, Swinnerton. He'd turn on you and the other men and spill the whole business to Randall or the law."

Smith had drunk the whiskey and turned. He could stand on his feet now and he was a little more sober. He ran an experimental hand up to his head and brought away fingers stained with blood.

"I guess you're right at that, Joe," the lawyer said. "I forgot for a moment. Smith, from now on you'll obey orders or suffer the consequences. That's the second time Joe's had to whack you over that thick skull because you asked for it. From now on, you're under guard in this camp with orders not to leave it, understand?"

SMITH DIDN'T reply. He bent and picked up his hat and, unmindful of the wincing pain, put it on. He had regained some of his braggadacio. "Ain't you kind of fergettin' thet Brad give orders fer me to keep prowlin' thet Morgan herd of Randall's and try to figger out a way to git rid of them two night guards? Maybe Brad, who's the real boss of this outfit, won't like it, savvy? You just forget the whole business 'til he gets back."

He stalked out of the room before Swinnerton could reply, and the lawyer turned to Turk and Jay. "You boys better get out of here and get back to your line camp. He's liable to load up and try again, and I want no more trouble here tonight."

Jay knew, saw the fear in his eyes. Swinnerton the lawyer was a man of brains; it took a man like Brad Morden to handle a situation like this.

"Aw, hell," Turk protested, his arm around Lucia's waist. "We got plenty of time, Jim. I'm only gittin' wound up, me and Lucia. I—"

"Let's go, Turk," Jay cut in. "He's right, there has been trouble enough tonight."

Turk Pennock looked at him queerly. "Boy, you hev changed! Fust time I ever knowed Joe Allison to run out on trouble. Oh, I fergot. You got to be a good boy on account of old man Randall. You hear thet, Lucia?"

Lucia heard it and twisted away from him. She went to Jay. "When are you coming back?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said, and turned toward the door.

Miguel, the Mexican horse thief from the Rio country, still leaned against the wall beside the entrance.

"The senor," he murmured, "is very *rapido* with the pistol. Very, very, *rapido*."

CHAPTER X

THEY WENT out and swung up into leather, reining their horses around and moving down toward the belt of sand. Jay thought, vaguely, this range has got to have some rain soon or it'll burn up.

Turk began to sing. He had brought along an extra quart and was pulling on it steadily. Presently, the bottle slipped out of his hand and thudded to the ground. "Aw, the hell with it," muttered Pennock. "I got 'nother in the cabin."

They worked back across the flats and Jay thought of his brother. At least, Joe was in good hands and would make a quicker recovery. Turk nodded in the saddle and occasionally aroused himself as his horse jolted down across a washout.

They got back to the cabin late with Turk Pennock sound asleep in the saddle. He fumbled for the ground with one foot, didn't find it, and fell flat on his back.

"You go on in," Jay said. "I'll take care of the horses."

He watched the other line riders go stumbling toward the cabin. Once Turk fell down and lay there, cursing foggily before he got to his feet and weaved on. Jay turned the horses loose and moved on through the darkness. Old Sandstone's bare ridge humped high in the starry sky above him. He went inside to find Turk on the floor. He got him into his bunk and twisted around with his rear to Turk, a booted foot between his legs. Pennock automatically put the other foot against Jay's pants and pushed hard. The boot came off and Jay went headlong into the darkness, flat on his face. He got up and removed the other boot. Turk rolled into his bunk with his clothes on and presently began to snore. Jay undressed, blew out the light, and went to bed.

He awoke at daylight as was his custom. No matter how late he stayed up at night, the habit of years caused him to come awake at daylight. He dressed, watered and fed the horses, came back and began to cook breakfast. The fracas with Peg Smith the night before was still in his mind. He only hoped that the man didn't find out the truth: That the real Joe was right there in camp, badly wounded. Smith would kill him in a moment. He knew the man too well by now. Smith would kill and kill quick, regardless of anything else.

Jay thought, I can't take any chances. I've got to kill Smith. And Mike Randall will raise hell when he finds out about it.

He went over and shook Pennock by the shoulder. "Hey, breakfast is ready, Turk. Let's get rolling. We've got some riding to do today."

Turk rolled over and opened bleary eyes. "Aw, the hell with it," he mumbled. "I'm sleepin' in. I'm tired."

Jay left him, after fixing the usual lunch. He caught his mount for the day, turned the others out to graze, and began the long ride westward from the cabin.

He watched the skylines all that day, keeping to the prairie and pushing back strays. Nothing happened. He kept a sharp eye out for horse tracks, but he knew that as long as Brad was over in the territories with a bunch of stolen stock, there was little likelihood of anything happening. Nothing did. Turk got his sleep, recovered from his drink, and again took up duties. Life flowed on for four more days until the afternoon Jay came across the flats toward the cabin and saw the horses. Three of them ground tied in front of the cabin. He hauled up by the corral and unsaddled, turning his mount loose to head for the water down below. They always kept one fresh horse in the cor-

ral with which to round up the others.

HE STRODE toward the cabin, and then he saw her. Ellen. Beside her was Mary Seltzer. Then her brother Harry came out of the doorway and he understood. They had ridden fifteen miles from the ranch.

He came up with a slight grin of embarrassment on his face and he saw the light in Ellen's eyes. No doubt about it, she loved his brother Joe.

"Joe, how are you?" she called and came to meet him.

"All right, I guess," he answered easily. "You're kind of a long ways from the home ranch, aren't you?"

"Mary and Harry wanted to see what this country looked like, and we decided to ride up. We can go back tonight. There's an early moon and it'll be fun. How've you been?"

"Fair to middling, I reckon," he answered. He nodded to Harry and then to his sister. "Mary, how do you like ranch life?"

"Very much," she smiled. "Ellen had been telling me about how you cowboys lived in these line camps and we decided to ride up."

Jay looked at her brother. He wore boots and spurs, and something about his mein said that he had known horsemanship in the east.

"Good," Jay said. "I'll start getting supper. No strays today and I got in early. Turk will be along in an hour or so. Not much I can offer you."

"As hungry as I am, Jay, I could eat anything," Ellen laughed.

He went inside and shed his gunbelt and chaps, after placing his rifle on the bunk. He rode with a rifle on his saddle all the time now. He was remembering what had happened in Brad Morden's horse thief camp. It was not a time to take chances.

He sloshed water into a basin, rolled up his sleeves, and washed. Then he headed for the stove. It was a matter of minutes until he had a fire going and some hot water on.

He looked over at Harry. "Turk's got part of a bottle of redeye around here someplace if you'd like a drink. I'll see if I can find it."

He saw the doubt in Ellen's eyes but paid no attention. He came back with the bottle, placed it on the kitchen table's oilcloth top, and brought two glasses, one filled with water. "Help yourself, Harry. Might not be a bad idea to take your horses out and grain them for the ride back. Horses get hungry, too."

Harry said, "Thanks, Joe. I hadn't thought of that. Mary, you and Ellen?"

"Just a touch in a glass of water," Mary said. "I'm tired after that long ride."

Ellen Randall laughed openly at her. "Long? Only fifteen miles. Joe here does thirty every day, plus another five chasing back strays. It's nothing uncommon for a man to do eighty miles in a day, if he has to, and has the right horse, or horses. That wasn't a ride, it was a jog. I'll take the same, Joe."

HE BROUGHT forth more glasses and then went to work mixing biscuit dough. Harry Seltzer finished his drink and rose. "I'd better go out and feed the horses," he said. "We watered just before we arrived."

"I'll go along with you," Ellen said quickly, a little too quickly. And Jay felt a dull anger rising slowly inside him. She thought he was his brother Joe and she was doing it to make him jealous. Damn her, he thought savagely, I'd like to break her neck. "Harry has a lot to learn," Ellen explained. "He wouldn't even know enough to loosen the cinches."

They disappeared through the doorway and Jay, his lips tight, took

several steps over to the potato sack.

"Joe, can I help you?" Mary inquired. "I'm really not as helpless as I look, just because I'm from the east. Here, let me peel those potatoes."

He helped her put them into a pan of water and gave her the paring knife. He went back to the biscuit dough, seething. The oven was getting hot and he cut the biscuits almost viciously with the top of a baking powder can, plopping them into the hot pan.

Ellen and Harry came back and presently Turk's big shadow darkened the doorway. He came in carrying his saddle, the sweat of the damp blankets filling the room.

"Well, bust mah britches!" he exclaimed. "We got visitors! Howdy, Miss Randall. Don't reckon I know these other folks. And me three days without a shave."

Ellen made the introductions and Jay went on slicing smoked ham. Harry Seltzer had another drink from the now almost empty bottle and Turk finished it off. He washed up and by the time he came inside again, supper was sizzling on the table.

Jay poured the coffee for them and they all sat down, Turk a little embarrassedly. It was plain that he was unused to eating supper with two lovely women present. But on the whole it was a merry affair and, afterwards, the two girls pitched in and helped wash the dishes.

By now, the sun had set and coolness had come to the terrain. Jay rolled a cigarette and indulged in the idle talk, aware of Ellen's presence and half thinking of what had happened at Brad Morden's headquarters a few nights ago. Joe was over there, badly wounded and a prisoner, though Joe didn't know it. And Ellen was here, obviously having been eager to make the fifteen mile ride just to see him. Jay was uncomfortable, thinking about it. Just one slip and everything would crash about Joe's ears. He had to be careful.

PRESENTLY, he rose and tossed away the last of the cigarette. "I'd better go down to the creek and get some water for in the morning," he said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"I'll go with you," Ellen said. "It'll be a long time before you're back at the ranch, darling."

He went out with her, carrying the two pails, his ears burning at Turk's open laughter. They walked down the well worn trail in silence. At the edge of the creek a hole had been dug out and a barrel, open at both ends, sunk and then surrounded by dirt. Jay dipped the buckets down into the cool depths and placed them on the ground. It was then he saw her face, bright in the first light of a new moon rising above the horizon.

"All right, Joe. Let's have an explanation," she said quietly.

He stared at her uncomprehendingly. "I don't know what you're driving at, Ellen. You saw I didn't take a drink tonight."

"Don't lie to me," she cried out passionately.

"I'm not lying to you," he said doggedly. "I just don't know what it's all about, that's all." He was completely puzzled.

"What about Lucia?" she demanded.

He felt his mind began to whirl. How the devil did she know about Lucia? "Why—" he began awkwardly, but she didn't give him a chance.

"So it's true? You thought I wouldn't find out, didn't you? I gave you my love, openly and frankly. I told you that you were the only man in the world for me. You promised to—oh, what's the use?" she cried out. "You didn't know that Peg Smith is on Dad's payroll to watch the Mor-

gans and to look out for strange tracks, did you? Well, he rode into the ranch and told Dad everything. He had a bandage around his head. You'd hit him over the head with a gun barrel a second time. You were down in some settlement—I don't know what kind—and drunk and making love to this Lucia, weren't you? You picked a quarrel with him and struck him, didn't you? Well, I didn't ride up here fifteen miles to show Mary and Harry the country. I rode up here to tell you that Dad is frothing at the mouth, that you're through, fired, and that I hate you from the bottom of my heart. But I didn't tell you when you first got in. I wanted to wait. I wanted to let you think you're getting away with something. I wanted to tell you that I'm marrying Harry Seltzer the first of next month!"

He let it sink in, standing rigidly. He knew that if he were Joe he'd slap her face, quarrel with her, anything except what he now felt. Instead, he bent and picked up the buckets.

"All right," he said quietly. "I'll pack up and haul in the morning."

He felt sick inside. He had let Joe down by trying to play Joe's game: riding with Turk to Brad Morden's layout on Antelope Creek. It made no difference that Joe would have done the same thing and suffered the same consequences. All he knew was that he had let Joe down. Joe, who lay flat on his back with a big bullet hole through his shoulder.

He started up the trail, and he could have sworn that he heard little choked sounds coming out of her.

"Haven't you anything to say?" she finally demanded, and he knew it was a defensive gesture to cover her feelings. "Aren't you even going to deny it?"

HE FELT the slight jar, at first, somewhere in the vicinity of his left shoulder blade. It increased through his senses with the speed of a dynamite explosion that ended up in his brain. The water pails went flying as he plunged face down in the trail. From somewhere nearby echoed the crash of a heavy caliber rifle.

He lay there on his face in the dirt, his senses telling him that something was wrong. He heard her scream, the sound of running bootsteps and, vaguely, in the distance came the reports of Turk's pistol and the sound of Turk's swearing. She was crying, "Joe! Joe, darling, you've been shot! Turk, come quick," and he felt her roll him over on his back.

Sounds blended from out of the night and he saw faces above him. Turk was sheathing the six shooter he'd grabbed off his bunk when he ran out, and panting and using unprintable words.

"That dirty..." and Jay heard more curses. He saw Mary Seltzer's face above him.

"Get him under the armpits and drag him up to the cabin," somebody said, and Turk's strong, hairy hands lifted him.

He felt his boot heels drag until Harry Seltzer picked them up; and then he was in the cabin, on his bunk, staring hazily at the ceiling and wondering what it was all about.

"Heat some water, Harry," Turk ordered. "Maybe there's some left from the supper dishes. What in the hell are we goin' to use for bandages?"

Mary Seltzer stepped through the doorway into the kitchen. She picked up her riding skirt and began to tear the petticoat below it into strips.

"Hurry up with the water, Harry," she called. "He's bleeding badly.

"Shot plumb through," Turk Pen-

nock said. "Heavy caliber rifle. He's hard hit."

"Who could have done it, Turk?" Ellen asked.

"No tellin'," was the vague reply, and Jay Allison could have hugged the horse thief for saying it. "Anything can happen up here. Rustlers, maybe."

CHAPTER XI

TURK TOOK his jackknife from a pocket and began to cut away Jay's bloody shirt. Full consciousness was returning now, though his brain was deadened from shock and the terrible pain. All the strength had been drained out of him. He lay there, unable to move even a finger. Turk bent and looked at the bluish colored hole, and then took him by an arm and slipped a horny hand beneath his side.

"Easy now, boy. Grit yore teeth. I've got to roll you over."

A groan burst from Jay as he went over on his face. Ellen twisted his head sideways and her hand stroked his face as she bent down close and kissed him. "Joe, forgive me," she whispered beggingly. "I was angry. I don't care what you've done or what you ever do, I'll still love you. Don't die, Joe, don't die!"

"He won't," Turk said. "But that's shore some hole where the bullet come out in front. Here, hand me thet pan of water."

Mary held the pan and Turk began to wash away the blood still pulsing from the wound. He folded a strip of the white petticoat into a pad and then smeared it with bacon grease before applying it. "Thet's to keep the pad from stickin' to the wound when it's changed," he explained. "This ain't the first shot-up cow puncher I've had to patch. He's bled a lot, but he'll come out of it. Give him time."

His big hands, deft with a rope—and likely a running iron, too—were equally deft with the bandages. When he finished, Jay lay on his back, stripped to the waist, his bandaged chest rising and falling with each tortured breath.

"Do you feel any better now, Joe?" Ellen Randall asked anxiously. She had not moved from where she sat by his head.

"Much," he got out. "I'll be all right."

Oh Lord, he almost prayed. I hope I don't get fever and start babbling about Joe!

"We've got to get him to a doctor," Ellen said. "It's fifteen miles to the ranch and twenty-five more to town. That's an eighty mile round trip, and Doc Stannifer is too old to make it."

"We can't move him tonight," Turk replied. "He's too weak and full of shock from thet big rifle bullet. But we cain't risk a fever, and I think tomorrer mornin' Harry an' me can rig a travois to haul him to the ranch. It's about as easy as a wagon an' we got plenty of blankets."

"Travois?" Mary asked. "Isn't that what the Indians used to haul their women and children and goods?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's it. You cut two long willow poles an' lace 'em with rawhide or blankets and wide enough so's a horse can fit between the upper ends like the shafts of a buggy, leavin' the free ends to drag on the ground. He'll ride easy."

"Who do you think did it, Turk?" Harry asked.

"Weeeell," Turk replied, scratching his red head thoughtfully, "I got a hunch it was—"

"Miguel?" whispered Jay Allison.

"Who's Miguel?" Ellen asked.

"Why...he's a sort of Mexican..."

"He's Lucia's lover," Jay whispered

again. "He was jealous because I danced with her."

HE WAS GLAD of the lie. Swinnerton had said that Peg Smith was working for Randall, and Ellen had said it too...bitterly. Jay didn't want Randall to go on the rampage and get into trouble with Smith. The man would turn on him and shoot him in the back as he had boasted of doing to so many others.

"Shore," Turk agreed very, very quickly, "I reckon thet's who it was. He's a Mex hoss thief who—uh—runs stolen stuff up from the border an' sells 'em to buyers—uh—up here. He seen Lucia, who's a purty little half breed girl, an' went loco over her. But we'll ketch up with him one of these days when Joe gits well." He turned to Ellen. "Seems to me, Miss Randall, you'd ought to be gettin' back to the ranch. A line cabin ain't no place fer a couple of young ladies. Harry can stay here an' give me a hand."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," came two feminine voices. Ellen added, "I'm going to stay right here and sit over him all night, Turk. I wouldn't leave him if the ranch was burning down."

"All right," Turk agreed reluctantly, scratching his shock of flaming hair again. "My bunk's kinda narrer fer two, but you two kin sleep in it, takin' turns. Harry an' me will take a coupla blankets an' bed down in the feed shed on the grain."

He rose and picked up his rifle, nodding to Harry. "Let's you an' me take the ax an' go down among the willows. I want to do a little scoutin' around now that the moon is up higher an' I can see. I'll show you how to cut and trim them poles."

They disappeared into the yellow glow of the newly risen moon and, presently, from down by the creek, came the faint thudding blows of an ax. Jay lay with eyes closed and the women tip-toed out into the kitchen. Ellen's face looked tired and drawn.

"I feel so rotten, Mary," she whispered so that the sound wouldn't carry. "I rode up here all the way just to accuse him of loving that Spanish girl...and minutes later he was shot."

"You love him very much, don't you, darling?" Mary asked.

"More than anything else in all this world. He quarrels with me, he's even slapped me, but there's something in his wild, untamed nature and that handsome face of his that goes through me like a knife every time I think of it. As soon as he gets well enough, I'm going to marry him, and Dad can go hang."

"I think Harry understands perfectly. All the way out here on the train he could talk of nothing but you, seeing you again. He told Father he was going to ask you to marry him. But I'm sure he understands now."

AFTER a time, Turk came back carrying the rifle and a long, slender willow pole. Harry carried the ax and another pole. Turk put the rifle beside the kitchen door and turned.

"I found his tracks, all right," he said. "He was hid in a brush clump not more'n seventy-five yards away; plenty close enough fer moonlight shootin'. I follered the tracks fer a quarter of a mile, but the way the toes dug in he was slopin' fast. He's probably miles away now an' still goin'."

He knew he was not exaggerating. Peg Smith had boasted of how he always established an alibi by long hard runs, following an ambush job.

They went to work on the poles, pulling the kitchen table near the doorway in order to work by the light. An hour later, the travois was finished. Turk straightened.

"That'll do it, I reckon. Well, I'm tard an' agoin' to turn in. You lock the cabin door an' drop thet bar in place, just in case thet dry gulchin ...thet feller decides to come back fer a look see. If you hear anything besides a coyote barkin', take a good breath an' let go with a scream thet'll lift the roof. We'll come arunnin'. Ellen, you keep Joe's six shooter handy, an' if you hear anything movin' around the door, let drive an' then start yellin'."

The two men went out with the blankets, and Mary and Ellen got ready for the night vigil. They covered the windows with old newspapers and barred the door. Jay still lay silently, his smooth muscled body motionless in the light of the lamp. He was either asleep or unconscious, Ellen thought.

As a matter of fact, he was wide awake. He heard them tiptoeing and talking in whispers, and presently Mary undressed and lay down on Turk's blankets. Ellen sat beside him as the night wore on. Sometime in the early morning hours he dropped off to sleep for a period and then awoke with a groan, thirst burning his mouth. He saw Ellen's anxious face over him and heard Mary come up quickly from the bunk.

"What is it, darling?" Mary asked.

"Water," he croaked.

She brought the glass and lifted his head while he drank. She wiped the wetness from around his face and neck and he closed his eyes again.

Then he dozed off once more.

DOWN AT the home ranch that night, the Randalls and Seltzers were playing poker for matches, Mike Randall teamed with Mrs. Seltzer, who was just learning the game, against his wife and John Seltzer.

Mrs. Randall laid down a full house and then reached over to pat her husband on the shoulder in a patronizing manner. "Got you that time, pappy," she chortled. "You should never try to bluff me. What's the matter with you? You're off your game tonight."

He reached into a vest pocket and brought out a huge watch which he began to wind with a key. "It's after eleven. Them kids said they'd be back by ten. I wonder what's happened to 'em?"

Mrs. Seltzer laughed. "Haven't you forgotten that you were young once yourself, Mike? They'll be along pretty soon."

Randall yawned. "Well, they can come along and be blowed. I like my sleep. I'm cleaned, anyhow, so I'm going to bed."

"Me, too," John Seltzer said, rising. "This change of climate, altitude, and that wonderful food keeps me sleepy all the time. I can't seem to get enough, even though I sleep two hours every afternoon. If this keeps up, I'll be a well man in no time and as fat as a hog. No more of the east for me. I'm staying in Texas."

"You menfolk go on to bed," Mrs. Randall said. "We'll wait up for the youngsters."

They made their good nights and Randall went in and pulled off his clothes. He rolled into the big four poster bed and promptly fell asleep.

A tap came on his shoulder. He awoke at once and was surprised to see the first faint touch of dawn coming through the window. His wife was still dressed. She hadn't gone to bed.

"Mike, it's after four and those kids haven't come back yet. I'm worried. Do you suppose something could have happened to them? Ellen and Mary would never spend a night in a line cabin with three men, particularly when they promised to be back last night."

Mike Randall hit the floor in his sock feet and began yanking on his pants. "By God!" he swore. "What a damned fool I've been! I shoulda knowed that when Ellen told Joe he was fired, them two kids wouldn't take it layin' down. I shoulda knowed him better than that. If he's took her off an' married her, why, by God..."

Randall breakfasted in gulps. "He'll be no son-in-law of mine," he swore between mouthfuls. "It's a good thing he wasn't around when Peg Smith told me about thet Mexican girl Joe was makin' love to. I'da thrown a gun on him, and I'll do it yet, by God!"

"Now, you just calm down," his wife said firmly. "We'll have no more of that kind of language in this house, Mike Randall."

HE DOWNED the last of his coffee and disappeared into a room. When he came out again, he was chapped and gun belted and carrying a saddle. Random seldom packed a sheath anymore. He usually put his old cap-and-ball six-shooter on the buggy seat beside him or stuck it in his waist band. He stomped out of the house and headed for the horse pasture.

"Star!" he bellowed. "Blue Star, come here you mean devil!" and he whistled shrilly.

As he caught the horse and began to slip on the bridle, he said, "I always said you could run down any horse in Texas and kill it on its feet. You may have to go a lot farther than that, because if he's married her, I'm going to shoot him down, so help me God!"

The saddle hit the sleek back and he cinched up with the speed and sureness of years of practice. "Now, you big devil," he said grimly, swinging up, "you ain't had a good run in two weeks on account of the visitors and things, but you're going to get one this morning. You're goin' to cover fifteen miles faster than any horse ever made it, and maybe fifteen hundred before we get back. I'll find them if I have to—"

He broke off and sawed hard on the reins as the great plunging horse beneath him lunged and fought the bit, impatient to be under way, to work off some of the tremendous energy and stamina in those flowing muscles and full barrel.

Randall gave him his head and the stallion lunged down the lane, shooting past the poplars, his iron shod hoofs thundering on the hard packed road. They pulled out into the open and Randall let him go for a quarter of a mile, then pulled him down to a swinging lope that never wavered as the ground fled past beneath the sleek belly. He pulled up to let Blue Star blow, and then they were off again. Sweat was beginning to stain the flanks and withers as the big brute warmed to his work, and a fleck of foam flew from his mouth as he settled down to the long fifteen mile run. Randall topped the swale, came out on higher country and saw the outlines of Old Sandstone eight miles away. Star's mane was out, flying in the wind, his mood seeming to match the mounting rage in his master.

For Randall was working himself up to a fury that pounded at his temples. The horse was lathered now, drenched with sweat, and when the cabin came into sight, Mike Randall forgot everything and used his spurs. He rode with a six shooter in his right hand, for there was no stopping him now. His rage had got the best of him. No matter what happened, he was going to kill Joe Allison on sight.

Star lunged down the last slope and across the bottom, momentum carry-

ing him up again and around the corner of the cabin. The rancher hit the ground and saw Ellen in the doorway.

"Where is he?" he bellowed. "Don't lie about it, Ellen. You stayed in this cabin last night. Where is he?"

He lunged to the doorway and pushed her aside as Turk and Harry jumped up from the table.

"Where is he?" he yelled again.

"In here, asleep."

It was Mary who stood in the doorway leading into the next room. Randall pushed forward, six shooter in hand, but she blocked his way. "Get outa my way." he roared at her.

"Pap, put up that gun and stop making a fool of yourself," snapped Ellen. "Cut it out."

"Get out of my way, Mary," Randall ordered and tried to push her.

She braced herself and looked at him with level eyes. "Not until you put down that gun. Joe was shot by an ambusher last night and may die."

All the fire went out of Mike Randall's eyes. He let out a sigh and his shoulders d r o o p e d. S l o w l y, he sheathed the cap-and-ball and rubbed his sweaty palm against his chaps. He went in, looked at the bandaged figure on the bed, came out in silence. This was different. Joe was one of his men. That made very much of a difference.

"Turk," he said feebly, "go out and lead Star around until he cools down, and then rub him down and put a blanket over him. God, how that devil can run!"

CHAPTER XII

LATE THAT night, Jay lay in a big bed upstairs in the west wing of the T-shaped ranch house. Following Randall's sudden appearance at the line cabin on a foam flecked horse, Harry Seltzer had saddled up and headed for the ranch with all possible speed to send back men with a wagon filled with a mattress and plenty of quilts, and to send another man to town for the doctor. The trip had been a slow, torturous one and Jay felt weak and sick.

Doctor Stannifer came downstairs. He was a mild mannered man in his late sixties, a little fat, and short-sighted despite the thick lensed spectacles. As a frontier doctor, his practice consisted mostly of delivering babies, setting broken legs and arms, and fixing gunshot wounds.

"He'll be all right. Thanks, Matilda," accepting the glass of brandy Mrs. Randall handed him. "He's lost plenty of blood and he's weak from that long haul. But I doubt if there'll be much fever, though you never can tell. But he's got youth to draw on, and like all these young fools who get themselves shot up, he's all rawhide and whipcord. Just change his bandages about every three days and be sure to wash your hands. If any infection sets in, send word and I'll drive out."

"It's too late to go back to town tonight, Jim," Mrs. Randall said. "You can stay over and go back in the morning."

"Fine, fine," the doctor said, rubbing his hands after putting down the contents of the glass. "It's been a long time since I've had a chance to clean Mike in a game of pinochle, and tonight I'm going to take his shirt."

Slow weeks followed for Jay. The rains set in two days after his arrival at the ranch, and he lay in bed and listened to the patter on the roof and wondered how Joe was making out up in Brad Morden's horse thief camp. He heard the sounds of riders slogging through the mud, the bawl of miserable, wet milk pen calves, listened to the wind, and watched for Ellen's appearance in his room.

For something had happened to her.

It seemed as though overnight she had changed. Her eyes avoided his, and she no longer called him darling and kissed him as she had at first.

He thought he knew what was troubling her. Now that he was out of danger and on the road to recovery, the fire in her had brought up mental pictures of the half-breed girl, Lucia. She was probably visioning him drunk at the settlement, loving the girl as Joe had loved them at dances in the face of her anger, and imagining 'Joe' walking through the night with his arm around Lucia's waist.

It was a mess, and he felt bad about it. But there could be no doubt of the truth: Ellen had changed and was almost avoiding him. On the other hand, it was Mary Seltzer who was with him almost constantly, waiting upon him and doing his slightest wish. She read to him until he fell asleep, and then pulled the sheet up around his neck and slipped softly from the room. He found himself thinking more and more of her.

A WEEK AFTER his arrival, Jim Swinnerton arrived at the ranch. He came upstairs with a cheery greeting and sat down on the edge of the bed. He was well dressed, clean shaven, and his eyes went more than once to Mary.

"How's the old shot-up cow puncher?" he inquired cheerfully.

"Coming along," Jay grunted. He didn't want to talk to the man, but it was obvious that Swinnerton wanted to talk with him.

Presently the lawyer turned to the two girls. "I'm his lawyer, you know. In case anything develops from this, could I ask him a few questions...in private?"

"Of course," Ellen replied. "Come along, Mary."

The door closed behind them and Swinnerton looked hard at Jay.

Jay asked, "You didn't tell them who did it?"

Swinnerton shook his head "It wouldn't do. They think it was Miguel."

"Good. Randall would really feel bad if he knew it was one of his own men. And if Ellen found out that Mike had hired Peg Smith to spy on me—or rather Joe—she'd turn on him, and that might break up this family. It was Smith, wasn't it?"

A nod. "He came back to camp, boasting that he'd killed you. I got three of our tougher boys and we literally kicked him out of the place. He showed up in town the other night, boasting hintingly, but not revealing anything. In case you don't know it, Mike fired him. Said he'd had enough of Peg and his boasting about what an exterminator he was. I don't know what happened to him. He just disappeared. I hope he's gone."

"I don't," grunted Jay. "I've got a little square-up to make for Joe and myself. How is Joe?"

The lawyer grinned. "One of the boys dropped through Ashbury last night—they're trickling through by ones and twos for a raid eight miles south of town—and said he was coming along fine. Hank, the one who brought him in on the travois. Eating his head off and able to sit up a bit. But your secret is safe."

"Heard any word from Morden?"

"None. He'll be in in a week or ten days. I've got to be up at camp to meet him."

Another two weeks passed. The rains stopped and the sun came out. The withered grass began to take on new life, and down in the big pasture the Morgans whistled and stomped. Harry Seltzer was trying his hand at punching cows, making daily rides with the men, and learning how

to use a six shooter. Randall was everywhere about the ranch, directing operations. And now that Jay was out of danger, the fiery tempered Irishman had again made things plain.

"I'm sorry you got shot, working for me," he'd said in his blunt way. "But the deal still stands. There'll be no marriage and you're still fired. I could forgive you anything except this Lucia business. I'll have no man as a son-in-law who was low enough to make love to a Mexican girl while engaged to my daughter."

"Didn't it ever occur to you that Peg Smith, hating me as he does, might have lied, sir?" Jay asked.

"All I know is that you admitted being there and that the girl was there," had come the blunt reply. "You went back to that line camp on certain conditions. It meant staying there and looking out after my interests and earning the money I paid you. If you had lived up to them conditions, you wouldn't a been miles away at night, when anything might have happened, fooling around with a Mexican girl. There ain't anything more that I can say or will say, Joe. When you get well, I'll pay you off and I want you to leave the ranch."

Jay had felt all sick inside knowing now that he was an unwelcome visitor at the ranch. Patient, would have been a better way of thinking about it, but somehow he felt almost like a stranger, as indeed he was. Mike Randall's explosive ultimatum, Ellen's avoidance of him. The one thing that sustained him was the look in Mary Seltzer's clear, level eyes. It was as though, in the face of Ellen's quiet attitude, he was turning more and more to the eastern girl.

TWO WEEKS later, Turk, risking Mike Randall's wrath, rode down from the line camp late one Saturday afternoon. He came clanking into the upstairs bedroom after a supper in the bunkhouse and came over, his grin broad and very welcome to Jay.

"Howdy, thar, boy!" he greeted, sitting down and tossing his hat at the bed post. The hat missed and went sailing to the floor. "Some fellers shore hev it lucky. Lay in bed all day with two bee-utiful gals to wait on him hand an' foot. You lucky son-of-a-gun. I wish it had been me. How you feelin'?"

"Coming along swell. Seen Lucia lately?

"Night 'fore last. Pore little kid."

"Something happen?"

"Plenty. Brad and the boys got back last week from the territories. They really hit trouble this time. Brad said as how they had a posse on their trails every minute of the way, and more in front. Seems the one chasin' them telegraphed ahead and sent word to all the outland officers. They run into a big fight up in the Indian Territory and lost half their hosses an' three men. Lucia's father was one of them. He got stopped cold by a rifle bullet at near four hundred yards. A lucky shot. Thet leaves the kid an orphan."

"Where's Miguel?"

"Thet Mex hoss thief? He slid out a few days ago, hittin' south fer the border country to steal another batch of hosses to bring up to Brad. He told her before he went that next time he was takin' her with him. He means it, too. She'd plumb scairt an' ready to pull up stakes an' go someplace else, now that her father is dead. But I ain't aimin' to let thet Mex do anything of the kind. If he tries anything while I'm around, I'm jest natcherly agoin' to throw a gun on him."

"He'll get her while you're away," Jay pointed out.

"Mebbe. I'm thinkin' of quittin' my job an' stickin' around the settlement jest to see he don't."

"That will make two of us. I'm out of a job, too. The old man is standing pat."

Turk's red face registered anger, mingled with surprise. "No! Why, thet old. . ." and he let go with a string of oaths.

"You can't blame him. Ellen is an only child, Turk, and a girl at that. So as soon as I can be moved a bit, I want you to get a rig and get me out of here."

"Where to?"

"The settlement, of course. It might be handy for me to be around when you tangle with your friend from the Rio."

"By the Almighty, I'll do it," Turk swore. "Just send me word."

The days flowed by. It was late August now and the weather was burning hot. It was early to think of the fall roundup, but Mike Randall was a thorough man when it came to the affairs of the ranch. Jay could leave his bed now and even walk around a bit, and from his upstairs window he saw the big chuckwagon and the bedroll wagon being overhauled down by the blacksmith shop. The iron rims of the wheels were being tightened, and every nut and bolt inspected. He watched the playful Morgans down in the pasture, listened to the whistles of Blue Star and Rover Boy, and saw with a bit of amazement that the colts were now almost as hip high as their mothers.

THERE CAME a day when he could walk around in the yard and go down to the fence to whistle at the Morgans. Blue Star would come for the sugar and so would many of the mares. It was Rover Boy—Rover Boy, the iron jawed—who disdained all efforts to bring him to the fence. He stood aloof, nostrils flaring, and once each week he and Mike Randall had it out down in the pasture, over Mrs. Randall's protest. He was getting too old to be riding high spirited racers. One of these days, the sensitive Rover Boy would bolt and drag him to his death. But it was all to no avail. Mike Randall rode his beloved thoroughbreds, and Jay sent word to Turk Pennock to come get him. He couldn't stay in the house any longer. There was more than the unwelcomeness in it; there was Ellen with her solicitous way of caring for him, but with the avoidance still in her eyes; and there was Mary Seltzer. . .

He had to get away.

He didn't tell any of them that he had sent word to Turk by one of the riders. He waited until the afternoon Turk came in from the north, leading a horse with Jay's saddle on. Mike Randall had just come in on Blue Star, riding with Seltzer, who bestrode Lilly Bell, the latter's shaggy big colt trotting along behind. Randall saw the horses in front of the hitchrail back of the east wing and frowned. Followed by John Seltzer, he clumped into the big living room.

"Who's the two horses belong to?" he asked. "They're wearin' my brand."

"Turk came down from the line camp," his wife explained. "He came to get Joe."

"He what?" roared Randall at his wife. "Say...who's running this ranch anyhow?"

He hit the stairs at a bound, his spurs rattling, and burst into the room to find Ellen and Mary with the two men.

"Turk, what are you doing here?" snapped the owner. "Why ain't you up at camp where you belong?"

"Shucks," drawled the big man, "things are quiet up there an' seein' as how Joe sent word fer me to come an' git him, I ups an' throws his saddle on a hoss an' come down."

"Is that why you came?" Ellen demanded, and Jay saw the quick catch in her eyes, heard it in her voice.

"Why, shore."

"Good," snapped Randall. "You come on downstairs and I'll pay you off. You can stay at the line camp until you're fit again, if you want to, then I want you to get off my range, understand?"

"Oh, no!" Ellen cried. "Dad, you're making a mistake in taking that attitude. It's not fair. He's still sick."

"He gets off and that's flat. I fired him once and now I'm doing it again, just to make sure. You're fired, Joe!"

"Why, you old bull headed mossback!" Turk roared back at him. "Somebody oughta hit you with a club an' knock some sense in yore head. You better send a couple of riders up to the line camp right away, because after tomorrer me an' Joe ain't agoin' to be there. Pay me off, too!"

RANDALL went out and slammed the door shut behind him. Jay, his arm strapped to his side, looked at Ellen.

"I'm sorry it had to end this way," he said, and meant it. He didn't know what Joe was going to do now. It looked as though things were all smashed up.

"So you're leaving, running out?" she said.

"Not much else I can do."

"You ought to know dad by now. You've seen him every day since you've been here. He likes to let his Irish temper blow off steam and give him an opportunity to roar around at somebody. He'll cool off by tomorrow—and then I'll take him in hand. Will you reconsider and stay at the camp?"

He shook his head. It was more than pride, after having been denounced and fired. It was Joe. He had to get back to Joe.

He saw the fire in her eyes begin to rise, the misunderstanding of his motives; motives he could not reveal. Her head went up. She started to say something and didn't finish it. Instead, she went toward the door.

"I'll go down and collect our pay," Turk said, and he too went out.

It left Jay alone with Mary Seltzer. She looked at him with that level-eyed look.

"Joe, I'm sorry," was all she said.

"So am I. But the cards fell that way."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know," he said, and shrugged his one good shoulder. "Does it matter?"

"No, I guess it's not too important," she answered in a very low voice.

He stepped closer to her. "Mary, something happened to Ellen these last weeks. Just what, I don't know. She's changed. I don't know why. Maybe because she was siding her old man, though she didn't act like it just now. But I owe you a lot. I'd like to show my appreciation in a very small way. Can I kiss you goodbye?"

"No, please don't, Joe!" she cried out, and he saw something akin to sheer terror in her eyes.

But his good arm had slipped around her slim waist, and he bent down and pressed his lips gently to hers. Some kind of a whimper came from her. Then she had her arms around his neck and was crying softly.

"Why did you do it?" she wept.

"You shouldn't have! I fought against it and fought against it. Ellen is my friend. We went to school together. She belongs to you. And now..."

She couldn't finish it, and neither could Jay Allison. He stepped back from her, surprised, a little shocked, not knowing what to say.

He said gently, "I'd better be going now."

He went down the stairs and he thought, Holy Mother, what a mess I've fixed up now!

CHAPTER XIII

UP IN THE horse thief settlement of Brad Morden, the real Joe Allison had made a rapid recovery and was on the verge of ripping the place apart. His arm was in a sling now, not strapped to his side anymore. He stomped up and down the cabin, swore at the big bosomed Mrs. Sanchez, and kicked savagely at a chair that happened to be in his way.

"This place is driving me loco," he yelled at the woman who had nursed him back to health. "How long do you think I'm going to stay cooped up in here like a rooster in a cage?"

"Silencio! Silencio! No le hace!" (Silence. Silence. It makes no difference.)

"The hell it don't!" he yelled angrily at her. "Armed guards all around this cabin. Those stinking thieves who saw me shot. And my brother Jay down there at the ranch with a bullet hole—"

The door opened from the darkness outside and Swinnerton and Brad Morden came in. Morden's face was not a pleasant sight to see. Across his right cheek, a bullet from a rifle fired at long range had cut a three inch furrow. The bandage was gone and in its place was a puffed, hard scab. When that scab peeled off, Brad Morden, the horse thief outlaw, would be branded for life with a three inch white streak across his cheek.

But the outlaw leader was in fine spirits. The horse stealing deal Swinnerton had engineered while he was gone, the one eighty miles south of Ashbury, had netted thirty head of really good stuff.

"You look like you're plumb on the prod," Morden remarked in high good humor.

"Why shouldn't I be?" Joe half snarled at him. "Cooped up here for weeks with nothing but a Mexican woman who yells, 'no savvy', every time I turn around. And my twin brother shot up, laying down there in bed at Mike's ranch. Why the hell shouldn't I be on the prod?"

"No reason at all. I was a young whippersnapper myself oncet."

"Calm down, Joe. We've got news for you," Swinnerton said.

Joe Allison faced them, belligerently. "Just what?" he demanded.

"If you'll calm down—"

"You calm down! All I want is a gun in my hand and a good horse to keep riding until I find Peg Smith. So he shot my brother, eh? Just wait 'til I get him lined over my sights. I'll pump so much lead into his belly that his guts will be strung out for a hundred yards. He shot my brother—"

Swinnerton looked at the other man. "Let him get it out of his system, Brad," he advised. "Then we'll tell him."

Joe braced both booted feet on the floor, legs astraddle, and glared at the both of them. "Tell me what?" he snorted.

"Jay just rode into camp a little while ago," Brad Morden explained. "Him and Turk Pennock. They quit Randall and pulled their freight. Randall fired you—or yore brother, I'm damned if I know which—and kicked him off the ranch. Something about you making love to Lucia."

THAT ONE brought an explosion that blistered the air of the rock cabin for five minutes. They went on to explain what had happened. Joe had cooled down. Like Mike Randall, his temper flamed fast, died just as quickly.

He paced up and down the floor. "So that's how it is?" His voice rose passionately. Because of what Peg Smith told Mike, he kicks over the traces and fires Jay. I want out of here. I'm going down to the ranch and bust things wide open."

"That," Morden grinned, "is exactly what you're going to do. Turk and yore twin brother just rode in a few minutes ago. They're down at one of the corrals unsaddling. So we're going to keep Jay here as a prisoner while you go down to the ranch and figure out some way to let us get at Mike Randall's Morgans. This country is gettin' hot. We're going to pull one more big deal and then haul out. That deal is sixty Morgan horses from the Randall ranch. You fail us, and it will be just too bad for that brother you seem to think so much of."

Joe started to make another explosive outburst, then wheeled as sound came from the door. It had opened and the man Hank, a lean, buck-toothed puncher, followed Turk Pennock and Jay inside. Hank had a cocked gun in his right fist.

"Here they are, Brad," he said. "Just like you ordered."

Joe Allison let out a yell and moved in on Jay like a two-legged cyclone. He flung an arm over his twin brother's good shoulder and whacked him on the back.

But some kind of a strangled sound had come from Turk Pennock. He stood with mouth slightly agape, his jaw almost sagging. "Hey, wait a minute!" he half bawled, "Now, just wait a minute!"

Joe grinned and came forward to pump his hand. "Turk, you old son of a gun, how are you?"

"Who're you?" Turk demanded, backing off cautiously.

"I'm Joe, you jackass."

"Thet's Joe standing right there," pointing.

"Nope, that's Jay, my twin brother. I'm Joe."

"Somebody's a liar around here, and I don't know who," Turk muttered, completely confused.

Brad Morden was doubled up, roaring with laughter. Swinnerton was smiling.

Jay said, "It's true, Turk. My name is Jay Allison. Joe is my twin brother."

"You mean, I've been with you in thet line camp all this time an' thought you was Joe?" Turk demanded.

"You're not the first to be fooled, Turk. We're a rare case of identical twins. Even our school teachers couldn't tell us apart. Nor our girls. I took Joe's place on the ranch until he got over the gunshot wound Peg Smith put through him the night he lost his head and helped on that Morgan raid at Randall's ranch."

"Well, I'll be...blowed!" muttered the stupified Turk.

BRAD MORDEN'S voice broke in. "And that ain't all, Turk. Nobody but the men on that raid that night know about Joe getting shot. Hank, here, included. So you're not doing any talking, savvy? We're going to keep this thing under cover until we get the Morgan herd from Mike Randall. Joe's going down now and try to figure out a way to get rid of them night guards so's we can steal the whole bunch. Them colts are big enough to travel fast, now, and it'll be the biggest haul we ever made. And it might mean we'll have to haul outa here. I know Mike Randall. He'll turn this country upside down to find

them Morgans, an' we might find things too hot. I've been thinking of moving on to new country for some time. Maybe over in Arizona Territory. They got a lot of good stuff over there, half Morgan and half desert bred hosses that'll bring plenty of money from the right buyers. So we're going to send Joe down to the ranch and keep Jay here as a sort of hostage just in case Joe gets any funny ideas about a doublecross. Savvy?"

"No," muttered Turk, still completely confused. "But mebbe if I hed a coupla drinks I could sorta figure it out, slow like. Come on, Hank."

"Remember," Swinnerton warned. "No talking."

The two men went out, heading for the bigger building for a few drinks, Turk in particular needing one badly. He was still a bit confused. Joe looked at the two leaders.

"So I'm free now, huh?"

Morden nodded. "As long as Jay is here. You can saddle up and leave anytime. Jim is closing out his affairs on the quiet and getting ready to head for Arizona to set up headquarters and look over the situation. We've about worked this country dry. That last trip told me all I wanted to know. They're on the lookout fer us up in the territories, and next time we might not get off so easy. Now, here's the way I figger it, Joe. You get down there an' stay on that ranch somehow—"

"I'll stay," Joe Allison cut in harshly. "There's no man keeping me from Ellen Randall."

"Good. You figure out a way to eliminate them night guards, and send me word or bring it. We'll round up about eighty head of Randall's regular range stuff and let it dribble in close to the ranch under darkness. One gang of picked men will handle the Morgans and drive 'em like the devil. The rest of the boys will drive them eighty in a different direction to throw off a false trail. By the time Randall an' his men find out their mistake, them Morgans will have a hundred mile head start. From then on, we can outrun them, or stand them off if they close in on us. I'll set the time and place of the raid because we've got to wait fer Miguel. He's coming back with fifteen or twenty head of good stuff from the border and going on west with us. You got it all clear?"

"Too clear," Joe said significantly.

"Fine and dandy. Hit out anytime."

"Wait until in the morning, Joe," his brother advised. "You can take back those two horses we got from the line camp."

"Good idea," Brad Morden agreed. "They're just run-of-the-mill cow stuff and we don't handle them kind."

"Any of the men spotted Peg Smith lately?" Joe asked.

Swinnerton nodded. "Two of the boys saw him down in Wagon Wheel Pass about two weeks ago. He was very much astonished that you—or rather, Jay—didn't die. He said he'd be back, and that this time he wouldn't miss. You watch your shy line, Joe."

"I will. And I sure aim to catch him, too."

JAY CHANGED clothes with his brother and went out into the night, free for the first time in weeks. He strode toward the lighted building toward which Turk and the man Hank had gone. Word had spread by some myserious means that he was back, and now they crowded around him, shaking hands and talking and asking questions—all except those few men who really knew the truth —that there were two Allison boys.

Turk stood talking with Lucia, and the puzzlement in his eyes showed that he wasn't sure yet which was which. But Joe was wearing his

brother's clothes and Turk whispered, "I thought you was supposed to stay in the cabin an' let Joe out."

"I'm Joe, you fool," chuckled the other. "I just changed clothes with my brother."

"My Gawd," muttered Turk Pennock. "This keeps up awhile an' I'll be agoin' around talkin' to myself."

He found Lucia looking up at him. "So you came back at last?" she asked him, smiling faintly. Her face was a little wan. It reflected the grief for a father now dead and whom she had worshipped, even though he was a thief. And there was the half hidden fear of the man Miguel. She was going along with the outfit, for she had never known any other life than following her father. And she knew full well why Miguel was going with them, too. The raider from the Rio was determined to have her.

"Just got in," Joe said casually. "But I'm going back in the morning to have it out with Mike Randall."

"And the girl?"

"That's why I'm going back," Joe grunted savagely. He changed the subject. "When's your handsome Romeo from the border returning?"

Her eyes flashed with the old spirited fire. "He is not my Romeo. I do not have a lover."

"No?" grinned Joe, bedevilling her. "Turk, you heard that. Take your arm from around her."

CHAPTER XIV

HE LEFT the settlement early the next morning, riding one Rafter R horse and leading the other. He and Jay had talked into the small hours while his brother told him in detail of everything that had happened there. Joe had it all pretty well down in his mind.

His brother was the greatest man in the world and Joe worshipped him, but Jay's one weakness lay in the fact that he didn't know how to handle women like Ellen Randall. She'd got out of hand because of Jay's way of doing things, and it was just about time Miss Ellen Randall had a curb bit put on her. That little matter, Joe Allison grimly determined, was going to be taken care of as soon as he got to the ranch; and if old Mike got tough about it, Joe was almost in the mood to pull a gun.

He wondered about this Mary, who had fallen in love with his brother. She must be something very special to make Jay get that uncomfortable look on his face when he mentioned her. Joe chuckled goodnaturedly to himself as he worked his way across the flats toward Old Sandstone's west end. All that was needed was for him to bring Ellen back into line, and everything would be all right. Explanations could be made later.

Right now, the big problem was to figure out a way to get his brother free of the mess Joe had gotten him into by that one foolish thing he'd done: Lost his head in anger against Mike and tried to help steal the Morgans, hoping later to help get them back. That thought caused him to grimace with anger at himself. It had been a fool thing to do, and now Jay was a prisoner, his life at stake if his twin brother failed to come through and make another try for the horses.

Impatience claimed him and he loosed his arm from the sling. It hurt a bit when it swung, but there was nothing wrong with his other hand. He watched the skyline and came up a draw to approach the line cabin. The boys had not yet had time to get up from the ranch, he figured, and that might give Peg Smith an opportunity to wait out an ambush, if he was in the vicinity. Joe swung down two hundred yards from the cabin and crawled up to the bank for a look. Smoke was coming out

of the kitchen pipe and he saw strange horses in the corral. Then a rider appeared in the doorway and Joe recognizd him.

He went back, swung into the saddle, and jogged on toward the corral. He loosed the lead horse and rode on, his right hand hanging warily at his hip. He handled the reins with his left, now back in the sling.

Joe pulled up; two men heard the sound and came to the doorway.

"Howdy, Joe," one spoke in surprise. "Thought you'd be in Kansas or Californy by now. We rode up to take yore place. Just got in. Light an' have a cup of coffee."

JOE SWUNG down and went inside. He sat down and awkwardly rolled a cigarette and waited for the coffee to finish boiling.

"How's things down at the ranch, Poke?" he asked.

Poke's leather brown face split in a grin. "You oughta be able to guess. The old man shore went on the prod after you left. He swore that if you ever set foot on the ranch again, he'd shoot you on sight. Called you an ungrateful coyote—"

"Ungrateful coyote!" Joe roared, half rising to his feet. "Why that old—that old—who does he think he is, anyhow? It's bad enough I get shot working for him, and now I'm an ungrateful coyote."

"You goin' back to the ranch?"

"You bet your life I'm goin' back to the ranch. I thought it over last night an' decided he ain't getting away with it."

He drank his coffee, rose and went outside, accompanied by the two men. He roped and saddled a fresh horse, said so-long, fellers, and headed south again.

Like Mike Randall, his temper rose with his emotions, and by the time he hit the ranch that afternoon, some kind of a small tornado was boiling inside him. Indignation at the way Jay had been fired, and at Ellen's attitude. Well, he'd fix that in a hurry, he told himself grimly.

He rode up and swung down back of the east wing, strode around the building and came up on the front porch where Mrs. Randall and John Seltzer's wife were sitting.

"Why, Joe!" exclaimed the ranch woman, rising, "You're back so soon?"

"You bet I'm back. Where's the old man?"

"He and John are out riding somewhere around the ranch."

"Where's Ellen?" he demanded.

"She and Mary went down to the big tank to catch some catfish for supper."

"Good, I'll go down and see her."

"All right. Go down and try to straighten it out between you young 'uns. But I don't know about Mike. He's cooled down a little and may be a bit ashamed of driving you off the ranch. At least Ellen accused him of it."

"I'll go down an' see him, but I want to see her first," he answered grimly. "She's either coming with me, or I stay here and Mike can go jump in the tank. And if he don't like it, I'll kick the seat of his pants," he scowled.

She gave a hearty laugh. "That I would like to see, Joe. Now, you just cool down and go straighten things out with Ellen."

He strode off the porch again and around the house to the hitch rack, and Mrs. Randall sighed. "Well, anyhow, he seems to be his old self again. He's wild and fiery tempered like Mike and Ellen, but there never was a better boy lived. He and Ellen fight like cat and dog, and there'll be another row in a few minutes, unless I miss my guess." Mrs. Randall sighed again. "But she'll tame him in time."

Joe had mounted and loped off past the corrals, heading south and west. A mile below, a great dirt dam had been thrown up across a narrow, deep swale and the sunlight shimmered on water backed up for a quarter of a mile. He thought of the many times he and Ellen had gone swimming in there on Sundays, she in an old dress and he in shirt and pants. They'd splashed and had water fights and floated around clinging to wooden barrels.

HE SAW the two saddled horses near one end of the dam, tethered to a mesquite tree, and left his own mount there. They were sitting at the edge of the water, willow poles stuck in the mud, watching the float-corks.

Ellen saw him come sliding down the bank with clods tumbling ahead of him and turned her gaze back to the cork, her lovely face impassive. He hauled up and looked down.

"Well," he snapped at her, his anger rising, "ain't you glad to see me?"

"No," she said calmly. "I was hoping you'd never come back."

"Quarrelin' with me, huh?"

"No, Joe, I'm not quarrelling with you. I mean every word I said. I don't love you anymore."

"Pah! How many times have I heard that? Now, look here Ellen," seating himself beside her, "let's cut out this monkey business. I shouldn't have blowed up an' left like I did, but what could I do after that damned old, hard headed range bull treated me the way he did? I—"

"You'll not talk about Mike that way," she cut in icily. Both had forgotten Mary. She sat in silence, something unfathomable in her clear eyes.

"The devil I won't!" he yelled at her. "I'll call him any blasted thing I please, and to his face, too, the old—"

Her hand made a hard resounding *splat* against the side of his face, and the fight was on. He slapped her back and then grabbed her in his arms and fought to kiss her while she fought back at him, wildly.

"Get your...hands off me," she panted. "Don't ever touch me again. Understand?"

Mary had risen to her feet, lifting the pole with its dripping line. "You two go ahead and fight it out," she said. "I'll go on up to the ranch."

Ellen's eyes were blazing, her red hair shining in the sun. "I mean it, Joe. You lied to me once too often, and that I can't stand. Wait a minute, Mary, and I'll go with you."

Joe brought in her pole and picked up the string of fish they had caught. They left the poles in the fork of a mesquite tree and mounted. The ride back to the ranch was made mostly in silence. The girls swung down and he gave Ellen the fish he had been carrying.

"See you tonight, honey? After supper?" he asked, much happier now.

"Not tonight or any other night," she answered. "We're through, Joe."

He stared at her, his face blanching a bit. "I'm danged if I don't think you mean that," he said.

"I never meant anything more in my life," she told him.

He watched them walk toward the house, and then he led the three horses inside the corral to unsaddle. Harry Seltzer came in and swung down and stripped the gear from the back of his mount. He didn't look much like an easterner now. His spurred boots were scuffed and his levis worn. He packed a six shooter at his right hip. The Seltzers were going to look around for a ranch that winter, and Harry was learning the business first hand.

"I had an idea you'd be back," he said quietly.

"Did you?" Joe snarled at him.

The other released the bit from his horse's mouth and turned. "I'd like to talk to you," he said, and led the way toward the saddle shed, kak over his shoulder.

He put it on the pole, hung the bridle over the horn, and faced Joe Allison. "I've got something to say," he remarked quietly.

"Well, I ain't deef and you ain't got lockjaw."

"Ever since Mary and I were kids, we've been closer together than the average brother and sister. We helped each other with lessons, fought each other's fights, and had few secrets from each other. She's quiet looking and sensitive, but underneath her exterior there's a lot of fire. She told me what happened up there in the room just before you left. It was a dirty trick, making her fall in love with you, because she's never been in love before. Now she's broken hearted. I think you're a rotten cad to have done it, and the only reason I don't beat your head off is because of that bad shoulder."

JOE ALLISON grinned at him and slipped his arm from the sling. He unbuckled his gunbelt and tossed it aside, the cloth sling following it. "Brother, if that's all that's stopping you, then take off that belt. You tried to make love to my girl behind my back, and that makes you a 'cad' too, you cad."

He began to circle cautiously, fists cocked, and a small cloud of dust from the powdered horse dung rose as they shuffled around each other. Then Joe lunged and struck swiftly. The blow missed and a boxer's left hook smashed into his stomach.

Harry had backed off. "I was middle weight boxing champion at college, Joe," he said without rancor. "I hate to do this, but you've got it coming."

"I spent a year at college myself," Joe grunted back, "before I whipped the agricultural prof and got dismissed." He didn't state that Jay also had resigned and that their father, who had never liked the idea in the first place, was secretly glad at their mother's chagrin. "But this ain't a college. It's a corral."

He lunged again, and his rush carried the easterner off his feet and down into the dust. And this was the kind of fighting Joe loved. Rough and tumble. He was on his man in a flash and, forgetting the shoulder, slashed out a hard left into his face. A red smear crossed Harry's nose, and Joe fought down a cry of pain in his shoulder. They rolled around on the ground, snapping, slashing, and gouging at each other. Joe got his legs hooked around the other man and drove his spur rowels into his back, cruelly. A blow caught him alongside the neck and sent a flash of lightning across his eyes. He felt a palm pushed under his chin and two fingers enter his eyes.

Joe broke free and they came apart, panting, eyeing each other, circling warily. They did not notice that Mike Randall and John Seltzer sat their horses at the corral gate, quietly watching.

Randall had a hand on the other man's arm. "No, John, don't stop it. I knew that young wildcat would be back. He could no more keep away from Ellen than the man in the moon. Let 'em fight it out. It'll do the both of them good."

They fought it out. Joe's shoulder was shooting off streaks of fiery pain now and he could hardly lift his left hand. He felt blow after blow coming in that he couldn't ward off. Harry was cutting him to pieces, circling warily. Then Joe caught him with a billygoat head plunge squarely in the stomach and they went down again.

"Box me, will you?" the puncher

panted. "That's...yore type of fightin'. This is mine."

HE HAD the other man by the throat, and Harry's fingers were pushing into his eyes, when the two older men saw the seriousness of the situation and pulled them apart.

Joe came to his feet, sobbing in great gulps of air, his left arm dangling uselessly at his side. Harry wiped at the blood around his nose with a white handkerchief.

John Seltzer said, "Son, that wasn't a very manly thing to do, fighting a half crippled man."

"Who's half crippled?" Joe bellowed at him. "I don't need but one good arm to lick him from here to town."

He went for his antagonist again, but Mike Randall had hold of him and the older man was a giant in strength. "That'll be enough, Joe. So you had to come back anyhow, huh?"

"I'm back to get Ellen or stay here with her. Do I get my job back?"

"Maybe Ellen doesn't want you back."

"That's between me and her, and you keep out of it, you old—"

"All right, all right," snorted Mike Randall. "I'm going to put you on night guard with the Morgans until you get well. Then you go right back to the line camp."

Joe had brought his brother's warbag from the line camp, and now he went over to get it off his saddle. He used one hand, pausing now and then to wipe an eye that persisted in streaming tears. His left arm hung uselessly at his side.

Harry Seltzer strode over, hand extended. "I'm sorry I forgot about that shoulder. It was rotten of me. Want to shake hands on it?"

"Go to hell!" Joe snarled at him. He got the warbag under his right arm, kicked savagely at the corral gate as he went through, and headed straight off for the bunkhouse.

He went inside, slammed the bag on his old bunk, and went into the kitchen. "Hello, Clarence," he greeted the cook. "Got a drink? I need it badly."

"Offhand, I'd say that you do," agreed the cook. "Of course I have, Joe. So you're back on the ranch with us? Good. This place didn't seem the same with you in bed up in the house."

HE BROUGHT back a bottle and Joe took a tremendous swig to ease the terrible pain in his shoulder. He cut his shirt away with a pair of borrowed scissors. The freshly healed wound had an angry look to it, and he was pretty certain that he had broken it open.

He had pulled away the last of the shirt and stripped to the waist, when the doorway darkened and Ellen and Mary came in. Blood had caked around his nose and one eye was swelling shut.

"You didn't lose any time, did you?" Ellen said bitingly. "Picking a fight with Harry the moment you got back to the ranch. You were wasting your time, being jealous. I meant what I said."

"Go to the devil!" he half yelled at her.

"And your breath smells like a bar room."

The fire was still shooting through his shoulder. He knew it would be stiff and sore for days. She said, "Come on up to the house and let's fix up that shoulder and wash the blood off your face."

"That shoulder is all right, and you can go jump in the tank like your old man. That shoulder feels fine."

She looked at the slashed remains of the shirt, at the angry blotch over the newly healed scar.

He said, "I wouldn't let you touch

it if the thing was torn off."

"Joe," Mary said quietly. "Joe." He looked up into her level-eyed gaze. "Come on up to the house."

He told himself he was doing it to spite Ellen. Whatever it was, he fumbled an extra shirt from the warbag, let Mary spread it over his shoulders, and went with them. All the fire was out of him now. He had let off steam and he felt better. And he had his job back. They took him upstairs to the same room Jay had occupied, and brought a pan of warm water. Mary washed the blood from his face, and then she and Ellen used a pungent ointment on his skin before strapping his arm to his side once more.

That night he went on guard down by the horse pasture.

CHAPTER XV

HE SPENT the night alternately lounging in the saddle, sitting with his back against a fence post and smoking thoughtfully, and riding his part of the big horse pasture fence. When he rode in at daylight, Harry was down at the corral, turning some of the saddle stock. No doubt about it, the easterner was set upon learning the cattle business from the ground up. Joe swung down to unsaddle with one hand, and the other came over. He had a slightly puffed upper lip and there was a cut above his left temple. One of Joe's eyes was still a bit puffed and discolored and his nose was very, very sore.

They looked at each other silently for a moment, then both burst out laughing. "Here, I'll give you a hand with the saddle," Harry said, going to work.

"Thanks," yawning. "I'm going to roll in and sleep all day."

"Everything quiet?"

Joe Allison nodded. "Not a murmur, but you can bet your shirt that that gang of horse thieves will try again sometime. Did you see Ellen last night?"

It was Harry's turn to nod. He had insisted on sleeping in the bunkhouse with the rest of the hands. "I went up for a while after supper."

"She still mad at me?"

"Frankly, I don't know, Joe. It's hard to tell what Ellen thinks sometimes. It was that way back east."

Joe said soberly, "I got a hunch she means it this time. I know Ellen pretty well. She still believes I was over in the settlement making love to that pretty half-Mexican girl living over there. Lucia. And she should have known that I'd cut off a right arm rather than fool around with other women, except to make her jealous. So that range is open, Harry. If she don't want me, then I won't bother her anymore."

"Will you stay on?"

"I suppose so. For awhile, at least."

He did stay on, riding the night guard from dark until dawn seven days a week. He never went about the house anymore and he had grown quieter. The hands were saying among themselves that that gunshot wound had taken something out of Joe Allison. His face was a little tired looking now, for he knew the raid wouldn't be postponed much longer. If it failed, he knew what to expect. His one fear above all was that Brad Morden might pull a double cross, kill Jay before he left the settlement, and then have Joe shot down to prevent him talking afterward.

He usually rode into the bunkhouse kitchen about eleven and got coffee from a pot Clarence left hot on the stove just before retiring, and sometimes when he came in earlier, he saw Mary Seltzer. He and Harry were close friends now, and Harry was seeing a lot of Ellen nights.

Then, one night, it came.

JOE HAD dismounted and sat with his back against a fence post about a half mile from the ranch house, when his horse twisted its head a bit and pointed its ears. He slid to his feet and had his pistol out, standing rigidly, straining his eyes through the night. It might be a coyote or a bobcat prowling around; and it might be a man named Peg Smith. Peg had been seen in Ashbury two weeks before. Joe stood there, using his horse for cover, peering over its neck. He saw the movement and he knew it was a man. He fell flat and a voice called softly, "Joe. Hey, Joe!"

He raised up his head a bit. "Who is it? And freeze or I'll start thumbing them."

"Don't shoot. It's me. Hank. I got a message to give you from Brad Morden."

Joe got up and swung into leather, recognizing Hank's voice. He rode out at a walk, still wary, and pulled up as a man got to his feet from the shallow washout and began brushing dust from his clothes. Joe swung to the ground again.

"Howdy, Joe," greeted the horse thief. "How's everything? How's it going?"

"All right. How's my brother Jay?"

"Fit as a fiddle. Shoulder is plumb well. Brad lets him out of the cabin once in awhile when there ain't no men around. But two of the boys guard him day and night. No doubt about it, the boss an' Jim Swinnerton mean business." Swinnerton had been to the ranch three times in recent weeks.

"I've no doubt about that part of it. But if he tries anything funny on Jay, I'll kill him. And you can tell him I said so, and that I really mean to do it, too."

"He already knows it," chuckled Hank.

"Swinnerton pulled stakes yet?"

"He's closed out all his cases. I hear there's goin' to be kind of a big farewell party for him som'ers. What you got lined up fer Brad an' the boys when they git here? That's what Brad tol' me to ask you."

Joe squatted down on his heels and began to talk. "You tell him that me and a man named Pat McClellan are night guardin' the pasture. We patrol the fence, him from one side and me from the other. We meet every hour on the hour by the watch. Tell Brad to send me word..." and Joe Allison went on to explain his plan.

Hank slipped away into the night again on foot, walked nearly a half mile, and remounted his horse. Joe went back on patrol, his face grimmer than ever. During the next two weeks, he again changed to his former ways. He became quarrelsome, he snarled at everybody in sight except Mary. Where Ellen had fought with him, Mary merely said quietly, "Joe, that will be enough." He rode Rover Boy evenings and the feud between the two became something almost personal. Joe cursed him and sawed at his iron jaw and threatened to run him until he dropped. He punished the big stallion severely, but not enough to hurt him or break his wind.

"They make a pretty good pair, those two," Mike Randall remarked to Ellen. "Both wild and untamed, and neither will quit."

Ellen didn't reply. She watched Joe day after day, and whatever her thoughts were, she kept them to herself. Harry had asked her to marry him, and she had asked him to wait a month before she gave him her reply.

THE TWO families went into town about twice every month, staying overnight and coming back the next day. Ellen brought Joe the regular

letters from his mother, and there was fear and anxiety in them. All of Jay's letters, addressed to Mud Bank, had been returned. It was the first time he had ever failed to let her know his whereabouts.

It was on one of these trips that Randall met Jim Swinnerton on the street in front of the Ford Hotel. He doffed his hat to the womenfolks, courtesy in every gesture.

"So you're leaving us, Jim?" the rancher asked.

"I'm afraid so. This country is getting too settled for me. I think I'll go up into one of the territories. I think there's a better future for a lawyer up there."

"When are you going?"

"In a couple of weeks or so. I've a few more affairs to wind up. And some friends have been hinting about giving me a party—"

He didn't get any further, for Mike Randall was a man who never believed in doing things by halves. He slapped his thigh a resounding blow. "Why, doggone me, Jim! Why didn't I think of it before? You bet you'll get a going away party. I ain't forgot how you won that lawsuit over land with the CJ outfit two years ago. You name the date, and we'll have every rancher in the country out to the place for a dance and barbeque."

"Now, hold on a minute, Mike," protested the lawyer. "The fall roundup wil be starting next week, and your own men will be on the range, as will men from all the other outfits. Most of the owners will be with them. It wouldn't fair to—ha, ha—me. But," he went on seriously, "if you'd care to have me out for an evening with just a few friends, I'd consider it an honor to accept."

"You've just accepted. Name the night."

"I'll be all cleared up by a week from this coming Saturday. I could ride out with my pack horse, stay all night, and set off Sunday."

And so it was agreed. Five nights later, Jay had a visit from Hank. The raid would come on the following Saturday night while the party was in progress. Old Jim was a slick one, all right, Hank had chuckled gleefully.

Joe Allison, still on night guard, received the news with a mingling of dread and relief. Whatever happened, it would end the suspense of Jay being held up there prisoner, of being around Ellen—this strange new Ellen —of being near Mary Seltzer.

CHAPTER XVI

UP AT THE settlement on Antelope Creek, Jay Allison had remained a prisoner and grown well. His wound was still tender, and would be for a long time, but he could use the arm freely and it caused him no pain. He had certain liberties in the camp, but his guards were with him always and he was not, of course, allowed his gun. Brad Morden was taking no chances on Joe pulling a double cross. He knew the fiery tempered Joe too well. Jay received all the information brought back in preparation for the big raid; and though he wouldn't admit it to himself, he was a little uneasy for fear that Joe might have "tangled" with Mike Randall over Ellen and let his temper cause him to make a second foolish mistake. Joe just might be mad enough to try it a second time.

For Jay knew the frame of mind his brother had been in when he left, and Joe was a veritable cyclone when he got mad. Nobody but his mother had ever been able to quiet him down.

He knew that the fall roundups were soon to get under way and he noted, too, a change in the atmosphere of the camp. There was a quickening of pace, a nervous excitement on the

part of the men and their women. He saw a Mexican woman loading a wagon with her household goods one morning, and shortly thereafter two more wagons driven by women pulled out in its wake.

Big things were in the wind.

His guards had relaxed their vigilance a bit, and he found an opportunity to corner Turk Pennock and find out what was coming. Turk grinned and scratched his head.

"Well, Jay, from what I can hear around camp, here's about the way she blows: Jim Swinnerton met Randall in town and finagled a sort of going away party out of him at the ranch. It'll be a week from this comin' Saturday. By thet time, most of Mike's hands will be out on the range with the wagons on the beef roundup. Accordin' to the way Joe planned it, while the shindig is in progress, Joe's agoin' to meet thet other guard, whack him over the head with a gun barrel, then tie him an' gag him. Then he's agoin' to ease the Morgans down to the end of the pasture a half mile from the ranch an' let 'em out the gate, where we'll all be waitin'. Brad ain't decided yet whether he'll substitute sixty head of other hosses an' hope Randall don't find it out fer a day or so, or use 'em to make a false trail. But all the wimmin folks are pullin' stakes from camp an' headin' out with a few of the boys who can be spared to guide them. We're all supposed to meet over at a certain place in Arizony."

"You going along?"

Turk scratched his head. "I reckon," he said. "Not much else to do, an' Lucia will be along, too."

"Turk, why don't you take her and get out of here," Jay urged. "Joe's hot tempered and all that, but he's still my brother and he laid down his promise. Suppose he's patched up his quarrel with Mike and told him everything? Do you realize what that means? An ambush. More likely, a wipeout. You'll get caught in it."

"I know it, but, dang it, Jay, she won't go."

"Miguel?" Jay queried softly.

"I don't know. You never can tell about these gals with Spanish blood in 'em. They like to be treated rough, an' I just ain't the kind to do it like thet Mex hoss thief."

"Then get out on your own. Something tells me that all kinds of hell is going to break over this range, and soon. Somebody is going to get killed. There may even be a few hung."

DOWN IN the swale along the creek, sixty head of dark colored horses were grazing. These were the ones Brad Morden had said he might use as substitutes for the Morgans. Jay watched the hours and then the days creep by, and paced the cabin restlessly while his guards sat outside and smoked and yawned. He had tried to get Turk to slip him a six shooter, but there wasn't a chance. The day guards watched when he talked to another man, and the night guards refused to let anyone enter the rock cabin which Jay now used as bachelor quarters. Mrs. Sanchez had gone three days before.

One afternoon, while Jay was lounging on his bunk and reading, he heard an exclamation from one of his guards and a chair, tipped back against the wall by the door, hit the dirt. He stepped to the opening and found the guards staring off down across the flats, past the corrals. In the distance, he saw fifteen or twenty head of horses coming at a fast trot, driven by three riders. One look at the high crowned *sombreros* and Jay knew.

Miguel had returned.

"Want to take a walk?" drawled Ace Carter, a middle-aged rustler and

outlaw, most of whose front teeth were gone. "Looks like we got visitors."

The three strolled down toward the corrals. Lucia joined them. Jay looked over and saw what was on her face. She knew.

"Ah, so your lover has come back?" he laughed at her teasingly.

This time there was no fiery reply. She said, "You must not talk like that. I had hoped he would not return."

One of the guards swung open a corral gate and the riders increased their speed. They spurred hard and drove the dusty mounts inside and then dismounted; tall, swarthy faced men in high crowned *sombreros,* short bolero jackets, and the knee length *chaparajos* of the Mexican cattle ranges. Miguel doffed the big hat and bowed to Lucia, his white teeth flashing.

"It is good to see the so lovely *senorita* again," he said.

"Howdy, Mig," Ace greeted, extending a hand. "Say, them's nice lookin' hosses."

"The best of Don Jesus Hernandez's fine herds," smiled the Mexican.

Jay saw that the sides of the beautiful gelding he rode were scabbed, as were many of the others. He noted the cruel, sharp rowels. Miguel had picked up a piece of baling wire and, resting a boot on the gate, was gouging out hair and clots of dried blood to loosen the stuck rowel. "The very best," he murmured and straightened. "The Senor Morden?"

"Over at the store," Ace said. "Big doin's comin' up in a few days. We're takin' the Morgans this Saturday night, Brad says."

"Good. That please me ver' much."

LUCIA HAD come to Jay's side and stood there as the riders unsaddled. He knew she might have fallen in love with him—or rather his brother Joe—but that was all in the past now. He loved the red-haired girl at the big ranch, and she knew it.

Miguel came out again, a smile on his face as he looked at Jay standing beside the girl.

"You have been ver' good to pay the close attention to Lucia in my absence, but you will not see her while I am here. This time when I go, she goes with me. You understand?"

"Can't hear you," Jay said coldly. "My hearing is plumb bad lately, I reckon."

The Mexican's eyes flashed. He shot something at her in hard staccato Spanish. Jay spoke it fairly well and understood a few of the words. Miguel was ordering her to keep away from the other men.

Jay took her back to the cabin she had next to his.

"I'm afraid," she whispered. "The way he looks at me. He is a wild border rider, the kind my father was when he married my Mexican mother. I know these men. What am I going to do?"

"Go with Turk," he said. "Get out of here."

Some of the old defiant fire came back into her dark eyes. He saw the lovely, oval shaped face, the skin that was almost white. "I do not love him. I will go with no man I do not love."

He left her, sorry for her, helpless, wracking his brain for a way to help her. He knew that Turk Pennock, good natured horse thief that he was, was in love with her. He'd do anything in the world for her. But she had lived her life among Americans. She was as educated as the average American girl, and proud of her Spanish blood. And Turk was not the man for her. Somebody like Joe Allison, yes. But Joe was in love with a beautiful red-haired ranch girl, and Lucia had accepted that fact.

She was alone.

Jay sat before his cabin door with his two guards. He saw the rider coming across the waters of the creek, and he recognized Peg Smith.

Jay cooked his supper and ate it listlessly. Afterward, when darkness had come down in full, he said to his guards, "Might as well go down to the store and see what's going on. No use to sit around here."

They strolled down to the larger building, but there was no music tonight. The camp appeared to be deserted except for restless men who strolled here and there, talked in low voices, and smoked. There wasn't a woman in the camp. They were gone. Jay saw that the last of the food and goods were gone from the shelves. They had been used to stock up the wagons now heading for Arizona.

The settlement was a town of animated ghosts. Ghosts who would soon be gone. One more big raid on the Morgans... And his brother Joe was framing it, playing it against Mike Randall and a red-haired girl...

Jay shook off his gloomy thoughts. He saw Turk at the bar with Lucia beside him; and he saw the Mexican Miguel leaning against the wall beside his two dark-faced companeros.

Brad Morden was nowhere in sight.

MIGUEL'S smouldering eyes were upon Turk Pennock, and Jay saw what was in them. His two men stood like statues, and something in their mein told Jay that there was going to be trouble. He saw the flick of the border raider's brown hand send the cigarette arcing through the air, and Miguel straightened.

"Lucia, you will go with me now," he said.

She ignored him. Turk had turned slowly, his hand resting near his gun. "Maybe she don't want to go," he drawled softly.

"Get away from her or I kill you," Miguel hissed.

"Lucia, you get clear of me," Turk said significantly, his eyes boring into Miguel's. "All right, you've made yore play, now follow it—"

He never finished the words. Miguel's dark hand flashed to his hip and the Remington six shooter came out spouting fire. Turk's gun went off once, as he was falling backward, tearing a slash in a cottonwood log rafter overhead. Then he was down on his back, his legs threshing, his gun on the floor beside him. Miguel sheathed the six shooter, his cold dark eyes flashing around the room. But this was a private affair between two men over a girl, and there was no interference.

"She is my woman," he stated coldly. "Lucia, you will...come with me."

Jay had leaped forward and knelt at Turk's side. His legs were not threshing any more. He lay lax, coughing, a trickle of red coming from a corner of his mouth. He hawked convulsively and spat a splotch of red spittle against the bar.

"Jay," he whispered. Jay bent down closer. "I loved...thet girl. Don't let thet...Mex take her. Promise...me."

"All right, Turk. I promise," Jay whispered.

"Thanks, pardner. Now I can die ...easy."

He died there on the floor of Brad Morden's place. Jay half rose. His hand swooped up Turk's six shooter. He spun—and found himself staring down the muzzle of Ace's gun.

"Sorry, old timer," the outlaw said without rancor. "I know how you feel about Turk. But no guns fer you. Boss's orders. Hand it over, Jay. I wouldn't want to try shootin' it out of yore hand."

Jay silently handed it over. He looked down at Turk, on his back, eyes wide open and staring unseeing-

ly at the ceiling. Jay bent down and closed them, then turned to the circle of men.

"Take him out and bury him, boys. He was a good man. I think I'll go over to the cabin."

He went out, followed by his two silent guards, and walked through the dusk. He saw Miguel lounging in the doorway of Lucia's cabin, and there was a sneering mockery in the death dealing Mexican's eyes as he looked at Jay.

PEG SMITH had gone straight to Morden's cabin and the two men had talked. The exterminator sat with a boot crossed over his knee, cigarette between fingers, his long shaggy locks down over his ears. "So thet's how it is, eh? Twins!"

"That's how it is, Peg. You shot Joe out of the saddle that night, just like you thought. Shot him through and through, but we got him outa there. I was purty mad about it at first, you sneakin' in on a hoss raid to settle a grudge, then I figgered he'd die an' maybe it was just as well. But he didn't, an' we had to git his brother up here pronto to take over to keep Mike Randall from gittin' suspicious."

"I knowed I got him!" exclaimed the killer, satisfaction in his eyes. "I don't miss."

"Anyhow, you got his brother, too, but it all come out right in the end. That's why I let you come back to camp after Jim chased you out. I got a job for you. It'll take a problem off my hands an' let you square up for gettin' whacked over the head. Tomorrer, some of the boys are takin' the eighty head an' headin' west with 'em. I'm doin' no hoss swappin', even fer them Morgans. This is goin' to be a straight raid. Jim will have the folks up at the ranch, an' the outfit are mostly out on the range. Joe says he'll knock out an' tie up the other guard an' ease the hosses out without a sound."

"Sounds good," exulted Smith.

"It is good," admitted Brad Morden. "Only, this is the haul of my life, the kind I've been waiting years to pull, and I'm not taking any chances on things goin' wrong. I don't trust Joe one inch. Jay neither, fer that matter. Them boys are too close. But Joe's too hot tempered. Now, you take his brother, he's cool an' got a head on him. So when we slip in after the herd, we're goin' to take Jay with us. After his brother knocks out thet guard, we're goin' to substitute an' bring Joe back with us as a prisoner. You an' one of the other boys is goin' up to the house an' keep ever'body under guard till daylight, includin' Jay. Thet'll give us about ten hours start, an' no hosses left on the ranch. You can finish off Jay an' burn the breeze to catch up, an' then I'll turn Joe over to you."

"How much?" asked Peg Smith softly.

Brad Morden sneered at him. "If you want to stay with my outfit and go to Arizony, you'll do as you're told an' take yore percentage an' risks with the rest of the boys."

"Why, I reckon thet's fair enough, Brad. But how come Jim ain't in on this? He wouldn't be pullin' a double cross now, would he? I kin take care of him shud yuh want."

Brad Morden snorted. "Jim goin' to be right there under yore guns to make it look good. Thet's why he finagled thet go-away party at the ranch. I run the hoss stealin' end of the outfit, an' Jim is the brains who gits us outa trouble when the law ketches up, sabe? Thet's why I took him in as a full pardner. I—Hey, thet was a shot. Three of 'em! Come on!"

CHAPTER XVII

JAY PACED the cabin restlessly, went out and chatted with the two guards sitting in tipped back chairs, went inside again. Every minute dragged by like an hour. He was still a little shaken by Turk's death, for he had liked the big man and had hoped to take him home someday and make him turn straight. But Turk was dead and Lucia, her shoulders drooping in despair, was cooking Miguel's supper, and the deadly shooting raider still leaned in the doorway of the next cabin, that mocking look in his eyes when they met Jay's.

Brad Morden came over and talked a bit, outlining plans for the big raid, and soon left. Six men came back from the slope back of the cabins, mattocks and shovels in their hands. Turk was under six feet of Texas earth, in an unmarked grave, his boots still on.

Darkness came down. It grew later and the guards yawned. Ace scratched himself and rolled a cigarette, impatient for the two night men to come on and relieve him and his pardner. From the cabin next door came staccato Spanish. Presently, Miguel's voice rose higher and Lucia's came back, sharp, defiant. Then came the spat of a hand against flesh, Lucia's scream, and the thresh of bodies and scuffling feet. Jay left the door in a bound, his muscles having acted automatically. Ace's chair crashed as he leaped up.

"Jay, you fool, come back here!" he bawled. "Keep yore nose outa somebody else's—"

The words were lost as Jay shot in through the doorway to find Lucia in a corner, fending off the slapping blows at her face, Miguel's snarling, dark visage above her.

"You're my woman," he was snarling, and slapped her again. "I teach

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you not to forget and to obey me—"

He half turned and his jaw made a perfect target for Jay's looping right hand smash. He felt pain go through his knuckles, and Miguel's lithe body struck the wall and then bounced off as he thudded to the floor. Jay was on him in a flash, jerking the Remington free of its sheath. He was going to kill the Mexican as he lay. But Ace's hard hand flashed down and yanked the gun from his fingers.

"I'll take thet one, too," Ace Carter grinned mildly. "I never seen sech a feller so anxious to git hold of a gun."

"Let me have it, Ace," snapped Jay. "I'm going to kill him."

"Shucks, now, boy," Ace grinned. "Brad is plumb fond of all them fine hosses Mig brings up here from the border an' sells to him. He'd be plumb upset at losin' a man like Mig. He just might be so upset, he'd shoot you on the spot. Cool down now, boy."

Jay turned to Lucia. She stood in the corner, the flush high in her white face. "You come with me," he ordered.

She came without a word.

"Now wait a minute, Jay," Ace protested. "You're buttin' in on something private—"

"That's right, Ace," Jay interrupted coldly. "People shouldn't butt in on something private. Come, Lucia."

SHE CAME without a word, and went with him to the big rock cabin. Once inside, she sank down and began to cry softly. Her slim shoulders shook. He hadn't realized until now just how beautiful she was.

"I'm like a dog," she wept. "No home, no relatives, just a half-breed girl. I'm going to kill myself tonight."

"None of that talk," he said sharply. "There's nothing about your Spanish blood that you should be ashamed of. You should be proud of it."

"But what am I going to do!"

"We'll think about that later. Tonight you'll share this cabin with me. Miguel will not want you in the morning."

She spent the night with him in the cabin, in Mrs. Sanchez' bunk. Alone.

Early next morning, a group of riders went to the corrals and saddled fresh horses. Each man carried a bulging slicker roll, crammed with groceries for a long trip. Jay watched them round up the sixty head of horses down in the flat and throw them in with the blooded ones Miguel had brought north. The cavalcade started west, topped a rise and was gone, leaving only a faint dust haze to mark its passing.

Miguel came by and there was sheer, murderous fury in his black eyes as he looked at Jay and Lucia in the doorway. Jay sneered at him and slipped his arm around her slim waist. He bent down and kissed her.

Miguel's face whitened. He walked on, followed by his two blank-faced *companeros*.

"Boy," Ace grinned up at him from the chair, "I just natcherly wouldn't want to be in yore boots."

Jay grinned crookedly and kept his arm around her waist. "I'm glad you're not," he chuckled.

He went back into the kitchen and turned to face her. "You're safe from him now, Lucia. If Joe and I come out of this, I'm taking you to the Randall ranch. If Mike can't make a home for you there—or some handsome young cow puncher don't fall in love with you and carry you off—I'll take you to my home in west Texas."

"Thank you, Jay, but I have never been any man's woman, and I would never go with any man I do not love."

"Just stay close to this cabin," he ordered. "And tell them all that

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you're my woman, that you belong to me now."

"There was a time," she smiled faintly, "when I would have been just that if Joe had asked me. But it is all past now."

ON SATURDAY morning, fifteen riders left the settlement, led by Brad Morden twelve Americans and the three Mexican *vaqueros*. They left behind them a dead settlement, a ghost town. Doors hung open and flies buzzed around unwashed breakfast dishes. The only sign of life was Lucia, standing alone and forlorn, in the doorway of the rock cabin that had proved sanctuary to her. That and a group of grain fed mounts in one of the crude brush corrals; picked mounts to be used in the first leg of the relay. They were going to drive the Morgans hard to the settlement, remount, and go on hard again with a ten hour start. The eighty other horses would be driven for two days and then halted until the others caught up. This would give Morden nearly forty men to handle one hundred and sixty head in the swift drive west, and an armed force capable of fighting it out with pursuing riders, should the necessity arise.

Brad Morden knew his business, and he had planned well.

They kept to the gullies and among the mesquites and off the skyline. Peg Smith had been thrown out ahead as scout, a long spyglass on his saddle. He was clearing the way. They crossed the Rafter R boundary in comparative safety, for the line riders were now with the outfit Randall had sent out to round up. By mid-afternoon, they came up in a draw a scant three miles from the ranch and swung down to loosen cinches. There was water for the horses. Afterward, they were staked out to graze and rest for the hard night of work ahead. The men ate cold food, for Morden had ordered no fires built. Two men were put out on guard; the others lounged around and half of them went to sleep. At sundown they stirred, ate more cold food, tightened cinches and mounted. They followed along draws and gullies in single file, the hoofs of the walking horses muffled in the sand.

Presently Jay, riding beside the outlaw, halted and conferred with Ace. Peg Smith and Hank sat close by.

"All right men, here's how we'll work it," Brad Morden called in a voice so that all could hear. "Me an' Jay an' Peg an' Hank an' Ace—five of us—will go forward to contact Joe. Peg an' Hank will cover the house an' not make any trouble unless they hear us. Joe's goin' to change clothes with Jay here an' then go back to camp under guard of Ace. You boys wait till we trickle the herd down this far and then fall in behind 'em. Don't push 'em till you're out of sound of the ranch. Thet all clear?"

There came several affirmitive answers and the five men rode forward. Jay saw the outlines of the poplars forming the lane he'd ridden down so many times, and he felt his stomach get all tight inside. Morden was playing it clever. The outlaw knew that Joe was hot headed. He knew that with Joe in his power, his cooler headed brother wouldn't try a double-cross.

THEY CAME to the fence and pulled up. Out in the pasture, Jay saw the outlines of the blooded Morgans. He hoped that Blue Star or Rover Boy didn't see or smell the other mounts and whistle. He knew Rover Boy too well. A mean one, that big stud.

Jay saw lights on in the big ranch house and could imagine Ellen's

lovely face at the supper table, laughing and talking with Harry. He heard singing and recognized Joe's voice as his brother jogged toward them. Joe pulled up and Jay saw his face in the night.

"Cut it out, you fool!" Brad Morden hissed in a low voice. "They'll hear you."

"They ought to," Joe grinned back at him. "They've heard it so much every night that the girls are tryin' to teach me some new songs. How are you, boy?" this to Jay.

"Where's the other night guard?" Morden snapped.

"You almost tromped on him," chuckled Joe Allison and reined over. They rode along the fence for fifty yards.

There was a saddled horse tied to the wire, and on the ground lay a muffled looking figure. It was thrashing around and making gurgling sounds. Joe swung down, examined the bonds, and remounted.

"He's come to," he said. "Guess I didn't hit him as hard as I thought. But he won't bother. Come on, the gate's down here about a quarter of a mile."

An hour later, the last of the big hipped colts, a few still sucking their mothers on occasional afternoons, trotted through and faded onto the plain. In the lead went Rover Boy and his half brother Blue Star. Somewhere in the herd, Lilly Bell trotted along. Brad Morden watched them go with a grin on his hard, crafty, outlaw face, and then casually slid his gun from its sheath to cover Joe.

"Get down, Joe, and change clothes with yore brother. You're a little bit too much of a hot head to have runnin' loose. Ace is goin' to take you back to camp an' wait for us. I ain't afraid of Jay doin' anything foolish as long as we got a gun at yore neck."

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thief!" Joe gritted savagely. "If I ever get out of this, I'll blow you to Kingdom Come."

"Later, later," was the pleasant reply. "That's the boy, Ace. You get his gun. Get busy changing clothes, boys, we got a hard night ahead of us an' every minute counts."

JOE GOT down, chopping off biting curses with every click of his teeth. He yanked savagely at his belt buckle and got his pants down, and finally freed one spur through a trouser leg. He hopped around on one foot, still cursing, lost his balance, and toppled headlong into Jay. They went down in a tangle of arms and legs and guffaws came from the riders.

"That other guard ain't bound," came Joe's voice in Jay's ear.

"Why don't you watch what you're doing?" Jay snarled at him and rose, his heart pounding.

There was more low laughter, the result of men letting off tension, as they changed. Ace strapped Joe's gunbelt around his waist and they rode off. Jay swung up, wondering at the whim of the outlaw in making them change clothes. He did not know that one of the many plans going through the outlaw's mind was to leave one dead body at the ranch.

Joe and his guard disappeared into the night, and the others took out after the herd, now walking along a half mile away. They moved in on it, the riders became blended, and then Jay made his break. He wheeled and drove in the spurs hard, heading for the ranch. From behind came a shout in Morden's strident voice, a shot, a curse, and then another shot.

"Now the fat's in the fire!" somebody bellowed.

Jay hunched down over his horse and made it give all it could give. He came back by the fence to see the bound rider getting to his feet and swinging up.

"That you, Joe? How'd you get away?"

Jay rapped out a terse explanation to the other's amazement. "Give me your gun," he ordered. "Peg Smith and a man named Hank are guarding the house."

"Shore," hurriedly unstrapping it. Joe had concealed it under his body when he had bound him. "Just you wait until them thieves blow into the place they're headed for! There ain't a man on the range tonight. They're goin' to hit that settlement at daylight."

"My God!" Jay Allison cried out, and sunk in the spurs.

Joe and Lucia would be in that camp when the attack started!

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE big dining room of the ranch house, the long table, covered by a white cloth, was loaded with about everything the four women had been able to prepare. Mike Randall sat at one end, Seltzer at the other. On one side, Mrs. Randall was beside Mrs. Seltzer.

Jim Swinnerton sat between the two girls. He was immaculately dressed, full of laughter, debonair.

He was also very much unaware that outside one of the windows stood Peg Smith and Hank. Swinnerton, wine glass in hand, was reciting a clever toast in verse.

"Hell," grunted Smith to his companion. "Brad said as how we wasn't to go in unless there was trouble. But I'd sorta enjoy bein' inside, eatin' some of thet food, an' drinkin' wine. It'd be fun to gloat over Mike. So he fired me, did he? Well?"

"Better not do it," Hank advised cautiously. "You know what Brad—"

The shots came. Two of them, faint

in the distance. Smith wheeled, staring off into the night. "They got the horses, but something has shore gone wrong. If they heard that shot inside —Come on, Hank!"

He opened the door and pushed in, gun in hand, followed by Hank. The laughter stopped and Mike Randall rose from the table, his face apoplectic. "What in tarnation is going on here, Peg?" he roared.

"You just sit right down again, Mike," Smith said woodenly, the killer instinct in him now. "Brad Morden has just run off yore herd of blooded Morgans. It was Joe Allison who framed it. He hit the other night guard over the head an' tied him up. We're goin' to hold you here 'til daylight to give 'em about ten hours start, so you might as well be comfortable an' git set fer a long night. There ain't a man except Mexican barn hands on the place, an' there ain't a hoss left either."

Some kind of a strangled sound came from the rancher. He started to rise again, sat down weakly.

"Peg, this will get you into some very bad trouble," Jim Swinnerton said smoothly, and Smith almost laughed as he detected a sly wink. "As a lawyer—"

"As a hoss thief," Smith cut in grinning, "I'd advise you to shut up. You're all stayin' right here 'til Hank an' me burn the breeze outa here in the mornin'. And I warn you, Mike, thet if you try to overhaul thet herd, Brad's got about forty *muy malo hombres* who can outrun and outshoot any men who foller. So jest go ahead with the supper. Say, thet roast looks good."

He reached over the table with his left hand and picked up a cut, wolfing it. "Help yoreself, Hank," he invited.

They began to eat, guffawing and winking at each other. This was the kind of a thing that a man of Peg

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Smith's character loved. His long locks hung over his ears, and he wiped now and then at his greasy mustache. The others at the table sat rigidly, Mike Randall's blood veins threatening to bust through his face.

"So that's it?" he finally got out. "I knew he hated me, but I didn't think even Joe would be low down enough to—"

"That will be enough, Mike," his wife put in quietly, and just as quietly he subsided into a rumble of unintelligible words and growls.

OUTSIDE IN the night, Jay had swung down, gun in hand, and moved from the corrals toward the house. The night guard was heading for the bunk house to begin a frantic search for a gun where there were no guns left. Jay moved forward cautiously, not knowing where the two men were, until he saw through the window. He stepped close to the door, left hand on the knob, then stepped inside.

"All right, Peg," he said quietly.

Peg Smith wheeled, his shoulder making the convulsive stab of muscles bracing themselves against the shock of a pistol butt in his palm. Gunfire filled the room, the crashes deafening. Jay stood there in the lamp light, half crouched, thumbing the six shooter as fast as he could work it. He shot Smith once, a snap shot that went home, and then drove three bullets into Hank before he saw him down threshing amid the screams of Mrs. Seltzer.

Jay straightened and swung the muzzle of the smokey colt on Jim Swinnerton, half out of his chair, hand instinctively stealing under his left armpit.

"The game's up, Jim," Jay said quietly.

"Joe, what's the meaning of all this?" Randall yelled, crashing his chair backward from the table. "What's all this about, Joe?"

It was Ellen Randall's voice that cut in quietly before he could reply. "His name is not Joe, Dad."

"He—his what?"

"His name is Jay Allison. He's Joe's twin brother."

Two men lay on the floor, crimson trickles working away from their bodies. There was dead silence in the room. Jay was looking at her and staring a bit.

"Ellen," he finally got out, "how did you know?"

She said calmly, "Joe and I used to go swimming. He wore an old shirt with the sleeves cut off. He had a long bullet scar on his right forearm. That night you got shot up at the line cabin, I was so frantic with worry and fear that I didn't notice. It wasn't until after we got you home and I took care of you that I saw there was no scar. I had been puzzled at the strange change in you. One time you were the wild Joe and another time you were...another person. So I wrote to your mother."

"So that's why you treated me like you did—" he began, but never finished, for Randall began to roar around the room like a mad bull.

Again, it was a quiet word from Mrs. Randall that calmed him down. Jay went on to explain everything; that Joe had plotted the whole thing; that Harry and the rest of the outfit would have the settlement surrounded at dawn for a wipeout; that Joe and Lucia—"

Mary had risen quietly. Her face had gone white, and in that moment Jay guessed her secret. She was in love with his brother, the wild one.

"Then Joe will be trapped here:.." she faltered.

"Why didn't he tell me?" raged Mike Randall. "Why did he have to tell every man in the outfit but me?

Oh, now I know! His way of getting back at me, eh? Oh..." he clenched two big fists, "just wait until I get my hands on that young whipper snapper's neck!" he gritted. "I'll—I'll—"

"You'll quiet down and not say another word," Mrs. Randall said.

Jay looked at the lawyer. His pale face had told Mike Randall everything he wanted to know. Jay said, "Mike, we had to fool you that way because Joe lost his head and got mad at you and tried to help steal your Morgans for spite. He didn't mean it. Had the deal gone through, he'd have gone right out and got his head shot off trying to get them back. So I had to come in and take his place to keep you and Ellen from getting suspicious. I'm taking Peg Smith's horse and burning the breeze for the settlement. I don't know whether I can beat them there or not. They've got a good head start, and they're pushing the Morgans fast. I'll try to free Joe and Lucia, if I can. If we get back, all bets will have to be off between you and Joe."

"They'll be off, and in a different way than you think!" Randall half bawled. "I'll break his blasted neck—"

"Mike!" Mrs. Randall again.

Jay said, "I guess I can depend upon you to take care of Jim here. Every minute counts with me."

He was out the door, running past the unarmed night guard. He heard the voice of a woman calling after him—either Mary or Ellen—but the drum of his horse's hoofs drowned out all sound.

CHAPTER XIX

DAYLIGHT broke over the settlement, cool and quiet. Not a sound disturbed the early rising of the dark curtain in the east. Jay crossed the creek, his horse stumbling and almost

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falling with him. He had ridden it down. He saw the dozing remounts in the corral, watered and fresh, and he looked back again at the horizon. Three miles behind him there showed a dust haze.

The Morgans were coming. Jay looked at the skyline, but not a breath of life seemed to be anywhere. It was forlorn, dead, deserted. But he knew that out there in the brush, grim-lipped men with Winchesters lay flat on their bellies and watched the oncoming dust haze.

He was riding into a holocaust, a death trap, where the life of his brother and a beautiful half-Spanish girl was at stake. Forlorn Lucia. He hoped that some kind of cruel fate would not, at the last moment, send her to follow Turk Pennock in the fresh grave up on the slope back of the cabins.

He swung back of the willows and then unsaddled, turning loose the played out horse. He stole forward on foot, slipping from cabin to cabin. Jim Swinnerton's big rock cabin came into view and Jay moved toward the back. He opened the door cautiously, slid in, and felt the gun at his back.

"Easy, Jay," Ace's mild voice said. "I'll shoot. Let me have the gun."

Jay gave it to him, some kind of a shudder going through his young frame. This just about ended it. He was sure of it when he saw Joe, bound hand and foot, on the other bunk.

Ace was saying in his drawling voice, "I heard a couple of .45's go blam right after we left, an' I figgered you'd either got kilt or got away. But I wasn't takin' no chances. I knowed that if you got free, you'd burn the breeze in here after Joe. I was watchin' when you slid in around them cabins. Hate to do it, Jay, but you know Brad."

"Did you see Mike?" Joe asked from the bunk.

Jay nodded.

"What did he say?" demanded the other.

"He hit the roof. He almost tore the house apart." He quoted words Ace had quoted to him only a short time previously. "Boy, I just naturally wouldn't want to be in your boots."

"Why, the old coyote!" Joe roared, rage making him tug at his bonds. "That ungrateful old moss backed son of a polecat! Just you wait 'til I get my hands on—"

"That's what he said about you," Jay said, and somehow managed a laugh. He told of what had happened at the ranch.

ACE CHUCKLED a little pleased sound. "So you got Jim, heh? Thet's good news to me. I never did cotton to the idea of thet law sharp bein' in this outfit. Me—I'm a hoss thief an' never expect to be anybody else. I like to be among my own kind. But now he'll find out what it means to do a long stretch. An' you got Peg Smith, too, huh? Good. I never liked thet sneakin' back shooter. I've killed a man or two in my time, but I never done it from the back. Too bad about Hank. He was the best brand blotter I ever knowed. I suppose you boys know what this means fer you both when Brad gits in. Nothin' personal about it, boys. You puts down yore money an' you takes yore choice, them's allus been my sentiments. An' I guess thet goes fer you, too, Lucia," he added. "Mig will be back with the boys."

"No," she said quietly, "not for me, Ace. I have a knife hidden away in my cabin. I intended to use it the other night, when Miguel was there. I will kill myself before I'll go with him."

The other guard looked out the open doorway. The edge of the sun

was peeping up, for it had taken Jay some time to get from the willows to the back door of the cabin. "Here they come," he announced.

Jay stepped forward and looked out, saw the first thin point of black drop down toward the creek. He saw Blue Star and Rover Boy, still out in front.

The dark line came on, hit the creek, spread out in the water, the thirsty horses sucking themselves full to obesity. Blue Star raised his magnificent head, water dripping from his muzzle, and whistled his defiance at the horses in the corral before moving on across, leading the way. Morden and his men put them into a big corral, closed the gate, and jogged toward the store.

"All right, boys," called the outlaw's piercing voice. "We've got a good ten hours start. Plenty of time fer a big breakfast an' a few drinks. Then we'll haul outa here fer new country where the fields are greener. Brad Morden has finished his business in Texas."

They loped across the two hundred yards of open ground separating the corrals from the collection of cabins and swung down. It was then that the first shot came. A high pitched report that spanged out hard and clear on the morning air. One of the riders, his leg uplifted to dismount, seemed to pause for a moment. Then he crumpled and fell headfirst to the ground.

"An ambush!" roared Morden's bull voice above the spanging of more rifles. "Get inside, back of them log walls!"

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larger building. Three men were down on the porch, one of them trying to raise himself up on his elbows. A man grabbed him and dragged him inside. Three others came running hard. They flashed past the rock and dived into the one occupied by Lucia. The door slammed shut. Jay heard the sound and looked around.

Lucia was gone.

He heard her scream, mingled with the sound of running bootsteps as Ace and the other man sprinted for the bigger building. They reached the porch, started up, and the pot-bellied figure of Ace seemed to sag. He hauled up on his tip toes and then sank down to lie still. Near him lay two others.

"Open up, open up!" yelled the other man, pounding on the door. Dust spurts were jumping up all around on his face, hand still clutching his gun, when the door opened. Too late.

JAY STUCK his head out of the rock cabin, then ducked as a slug hit slantwise and droned off with a high pitched scream, a misshapen piece of lead hurtling off into the sky. He saw four figures run out. Miguel and his three men, dragging Lucia.

She had got back to the cabin too late to get the knife.

They broke into a struggling run across the open ground, and bullets began to throw up little dust spurts all around them. The men were shooting carefully because of the woman. Then, one of the dark-faced *vaqueros* somersaulted and rolled over to lay curled up. They went another fifty yards before the second fell. He got to his knees, tried to rise, then sank down and lay flat on his face. Miguel had Lucia by the arm now and they were running. Jay broke from the protection of the cabin. A shot slammed past his face. Another slapped the ground beside his feet. He wheeled and legged it for Lucia's cabin and dived inside, yelling at the men on the slope above.

He heard Joe's voice roaring curses at him to come back and cut him loose. But he saw the gun—one the girl had taken from Turk Pennock's body and hoped to give to him—and forgot everything else. He opened the door, caught his breath, and broke into the clean morning air where trapped men were dying and a fight to the finish was in progress.

That two hundred yards was the longest mile he had ever run. Gunfire pinned him down back of one of the corrals and he lay there, panting and wiping the sweat from his face. He rose and saw the lithe figure of Miguel in the corral with a rope. He had never believed that a man could catch and saddle horses so fast. He saw the rope go out and Blue Star come up, trembling and snorting. Then, as though time had fled and this was magic, two horses broke from the corral. The Mexican rode Blue Star and was leading Lilly Bell. Astride the mare, her hands bound to the saddle horn, rode Lucia.

Jay leaped to his feet and dashed for the corral gate, slamming it shut as shots whizzed by. He saw several saddles on the ground and grabbed a rope. A man jumped over the fence and ran toward him, gun in hand.

"Who is it—Joe or Jay?" called Harry Seltzer.

He didn't look like an easterner now. All vestiges of his former life had vanished. He was gun belted and grim.

"Jay! It's Jay. Joe's bound hand and foot over in that rock cabin. Grab a rope and get Rover Boy. Miguel's got Lucia."

He caught the flash of resentment, saw the indecision, and snatched up

a rope. Rover Boy swung to face him and whistled shrilly. Jay went at another horse, wheeled and caught the big stud with a deft throw. Harry's rope sang out and settled over the neck of a long legged Morgan gelding.

"I'm with you, Jay," he yelled.

"Who, now, whoa, you iron jawed devil!" Jay called and drew in closer. Out on the plain, Blue Star and Lilly Bell were running, Miguel's figure hunched low over the horn. Rifles were spanging and Jay could see the dust spurts, and he hoped for Mike Randall's sake that the horses would not be hit. He got the saddle on Rover Boy and the big stallion reared, snorting, remembering his bouts with Joe Allison. Jay shot him out of the corral, aware that Harry was close behind.

ROVER BOY had come more than thirty miles during the night. He was full of water and unfed. But he reared and plunged, and then Jay got him turned, sawing at the iron jaws, and the great blooded Morgan settled down to a long running lope and began to eat up the distance between him and those two horses now far out on the plain. Jay felt the surge of his great muscles and he watched anxiously for the first signs of sweat to appear on withers and flanks. But Randall had always said that Rover Boy was a cold blooded devil whose veins ran ice, and Jay now knew it to be the truth. He was a "cold" horse. They covered a half mile and then a mile and then another mile. Jay drove him on, conserving his wind and letting him set the pace. Three hundred yards behind, Harry Seltzer laid on dull spurs to try and hold the pace.

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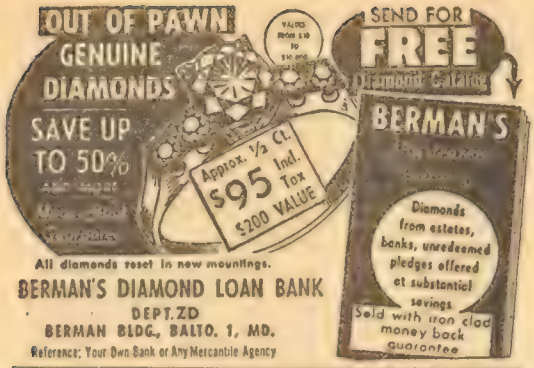

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in his sleek belly. Jay gave him his head, and the iron shod hoofs rang out, and Rover Boy settled down to the job of overhauling Blue Star. It went on mile after mile and now the big stallions's breathing began to be heard above the pound of his iron shod hoofs. He was showing lather along his flanks and around the bit in his mouth. But the steady drum of his hoofs never wavered, and Jay Allison knew that he was riding his greatest ride astride the kind of horse he'd never race again.

Two miles ahead, the plain funnelled into a shallow draw with ridges climbing up in a V on either side. He knew that Miguel, not three hundred yards ahead and rowelling Star cruelly, wouldn't dare try to turn aside. That would give his pursuer a short cut, a chance to catch up. He'd have to go up one of those ridges and it would be there, in the climb of winded horses, that the test would be made.

If Miguel ever got his mounts over that ridge, Jay Allison had the feeling that his race was lost. He watched them draw nearer and nearer, cedar studded and ominous. Lilly Bell was still holding up good because of the light weight she carried and, in that last quarter of a mile, Jay turned Rover Boy loose and gave him the spurs, rowelling him hard along his heaving sides. The gap began to close and the race went on until, not more than a hundred yards from the base of the ridge, Lilly Bell stumbled and fell.

Jay saw a cloud of dust with four feet sticking up in it; he knew that Lucia's hands were tied to the saddle horn, and some kind of a prayer went out of him.

Poor kid, he thought, I guess it wasn't in the cards for her any other way.

He drummed past and saw only the

mare, struggling to her feet and dragging a limp figure, tied by the wrists to the horn. He wanted to stop, but there was nothing he could do now. Rover Boy was running his great race and every foot counted. He saw Blue Star's heaving, lather covered haunches start up the slope, and then Rover Boy, fifty yards behind, was hitting it too. Up, up, they went and Jay caught sight of a dark face turning back, of a gun spouting downward. The Mexican raider was shooting at the horse.

Rover Boy's sides were heaving, his breath labored and coming with a shrillness that told of a warning. Jay dug in the spurs and the great beast responded in one final burst that carried him up, just as Blue Star's Blue haunches disappeared over the ridge.

Star had won his race.

JAY LIPPED the ridge, and then ducked and dived out of the saddle as the shot slammed past his head, thrown wild. He saw Blue Star down on his side, belly heaving convulsively, saw the man who faced him with a flaming six shooter. Jay fired twice and missed. He fired a third time and missed, at a distance of thirty feet. Something said, Steady, boy, aim and squeeze them off.

He aimed and shot the horse thief squarely in the belly. As Miguel fell, Jay shot him twice more.

Sound came from behind and he turned. Rover Boy stood outlined on the tip of the ridge, his great barrel heaving, nostrils flaring; something magnificent etched in moving life that said he was king of all his domain.

The great iron jawed devil had run Blue Star down on his feet!

Nearly an hour later, Jay rode back across the flats, leading Blue Star.

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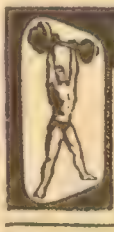

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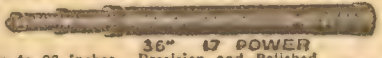

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He saw two horses ahead and two figures on the ground. Harry looked up, Lucia's head in his lap, as Jay jumped down.

"How is she? Dead?" he asked anxiously.

"She's got a pulse, but I can't bring her out of it."

There happened to be a canteen on one of the saddles. Jay wet his bandana and began to bathe her face. Presently, she opened her eyes and looked up.

"Jay," she whispered.

"How are you, Lucia?" he asked breathlessly.

She struggled to rise, got weakly to her feet. "All right, I think. The mare fell but threw me clear of the saddle. She went up on her back but didn't roll over me. It's my wrists. I was tied to the saddle horn."

Her wrists were a pitiful sight to see; raw and bleeding and beginning to swell. She walked over to Lilly Bell.

"Jay, she's beautiful," Harry whispered breathlessly, his eyes shining.

"Harry," Jay Allison said, "if you tell Mike Randall that Rover Boy ran Blue Star down after a half mile start, I'll tangle with you. It would break Mike's heart."

CHAPTER XX

ABOUT TWO nights later, five people—four men and a girl—approached the lower gate of Mike Randall's horse pasture. Joe loped ahead and swung down to open it, then sat by as the Morgans lead by the proud headed Rover Boy, trotted through into familiar feeding grounds. Rover Boy raised his head and whistled shrilly into the night as Joe closed the gate back of them. He looked over to where Harry sat

beside Lucia. Something had happened to those two in a very short time. Some kind of a sweet lightning had struck. Rover Boy whistled again.

The men of the outfit had returned to the roundup wagons to take up their duties. One rider had been dispatched ahead to tell Mike Randall what had happened. Jim Swinnerton was in jail in Ashbury.

And in the settlement, back of ashy heaps that once had been cabins and corrals, several more unmarked graves surrounded the one where unfortunate Turk Pennock slept the long sleep. Five of these men, who had surrendered, slept with their necks at an odd angle.

There were big cottonwoods along Antelope Creek; cottonwoods with big spreading branches...

"Come on," Joe Allison chuckled to the others. "Mike'll hear thet stallion's whistle an' come faunchin' down here like a bear with a bug on its tail. Let's fog it up to the ranch."

They set out at a lope and the lane of poplars loomed up, and it became a race as the five horses pounded down the lane on the hard packed earth, iron shod hoofs ringing out. Doors flew open at the ranch house, and the five swung down. Harry Seltzer was the first to step forward, shaggy haired, unshaved, dusty.

"You wild man!" cried out his mother. "You—you Texas cowboy!"

"Ho, you men, come on inside," boomed out Randall's voice. "We've got a lot to talk over."

They left the horses and went through the door into the big dining room, now freshly scrubbed.

Jay walked over to Ellen. "You're looking well," was all he said.

She said, "I'm glad you got back all right, Jay."

"I'm glad to get back. I want you to know and like Lucia. She's had

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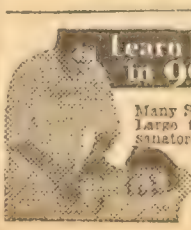

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a hard time of it." He thought, she can tell us apart now. Only she and mom!

"She's welcome in this home," Ellen said softly.

"Which one of you," came Mike Randall's bull voice above the hub-hub of talk, "is Joe?"

Joe wheeled to face him. "Me!" he said belligerently. "That's Jay over there. Why?"

Randall's face began to turn red. The red increased and then he let out a full lunged roar. "You young whipper-snapper!" he half bawled and moved in toward him. "Double cross me, did you? I ought to—"

"Now look here, you old—"

"Mike!"

"Joe!"

The first voice had been that of Mrs. Randall. The second was that of Mary Seltzer.

"Joe," she said again in that quiet voice.

He turned slowly, and some kind of a sheepish grin slid across his young face. "What is it, honey?"

"There will be no more of that."

"All right," he said and grabbed her. He gave her a resounding kiss and was pushed back, firmly.

"There will be no more of that, either," she said. "That is, not in front of other people," she added, and blushed.

Somehow, Jay found himself walking with Ellen in the night, leading the horses down to the corrals to be unsaddled. He finished, turned the last one loose, and came toward the corral gate. He saw the white of her dress, and it reminded him of another night he had seen it, at this same gate, when he was leaving for the line camp to begin his part in a horse-thief masquerade.

He reached out and took her in

his arms, held her close, and the little whimpering sounds he made this time were no imitation of Joe.

THE END

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THE OLD SAW "what you don't know, can't hurt you", isn't necessarily true, as many a man has found out to his sorrow. Out west, many of the Indians who weren't warriors or who had degenerated into simple begging scoundrels, discovered this fact to their sorrow. It was the practice of such Indians, particularly during the barren winter season, to go from camp to camp, from town to town, from settlement to settlement, begging for food, for provisions, for work.

Very frequently, they would present a note, presumably given them by their last employer. They would hand this note over with a flourish, as a sort of recommendation. But being unable to read, they never did learn what the note said.

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over the brink, and they lie at last in a high heap of broken bodies at the foot of the precipice.

The Indians utilized this propensity of the buffalo to heedless stampede, to procure great numbers of dead buffalo for their skins. When a herd was found near enough to a cliff, the Indians would form a line at the rear of the buffalo, then incite them to panic by yelling and rushing at them, guding the resulting stampede toward the precipice. The fall of the heavy bodies, from a great height, together with the impact of other bodies falling upon them, and the terror of such a massacre, caused the death of large numbers of the herd; or they were so injured that the Indians could easily finish them off.

The Indians then skinned the animals, tanned the hides and sold them to the fur traders. They were paid perhaps three or four pounds of sugar, or given some similar cheap commodity, for each good, well-tanned buffalo robe. This was in the earlier days, before thousands of professional buffalo hunters among the white men made a good business of killing off the buffalo herds.

At the foot of many a cliff thoughout the West have been found great piles of buffalo skeletons left from these Indian-incited buffalo stampedes. After the railroads penetrated the area, the bones were gathered up by the trainloads, and shipped East to be made into fertilizer.

Derringer Stinger

★ By G. Watt ★

IN THE old West, the favorite weapon of gamblers, crooks and ladies, was the little Derringer pistol. Why?

The reason is simple. The Derringer is a small weapon, easily concealed, and though capable of but a single shot, or in some cases, two, it was deadly and accurate at the close ranges for which it was intended. You don't need a sixgun to blast a man off his feet from across the narrow width of a poker or faro table.

Furthermore, the Derringer could be kept right at hand. Some of these little pistols were designed to be concealed up the sleeve. In fact, special variations of these concealed weapons were devised wherein a quick flip of the hand would send a sleeve-concealed gun right into the palm of the user's hand. The Derringer was a cheap, easily-built weapon, and a favorite with the ladies who liked to carry a little "protection" in their handbags. Along with the burro, the axe, the sixgun and the Sharps rifle, the Derringer must be regarded as one of the tools with which the West was constructed. It would be interesting to have a history of a single gun. What tales it could tell!

THE END

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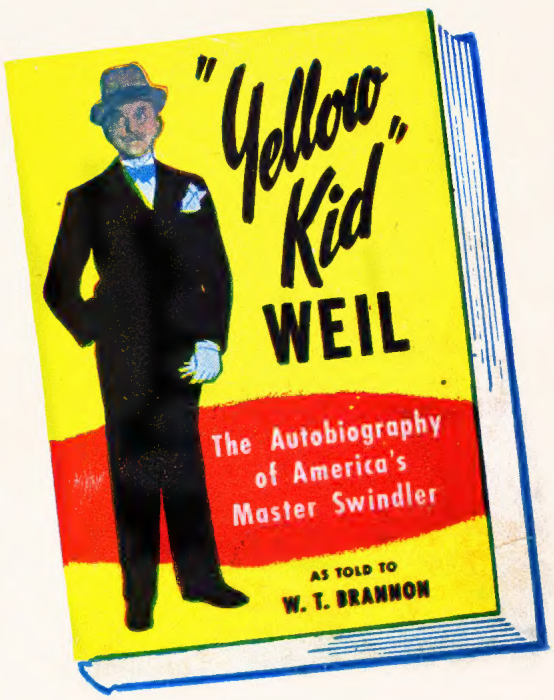

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